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The Hesitating Text:

The Fantastic and Magical Realism

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This dissertation is submitted for the degree of

Master of Philosophy

October 2014

Declaration

I hereby declare that the work presented in this dissertation is my own. Where other sources of information have been used, they have been acknowledged. This dissertation has not been submitted anywhere for any award.

Signature:

Abstract

The Hesitating Text: The Fantastic and Magical Realism

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Fantastic literature has often been studied in relation to its predecessor, the Gothic, but very rarely in relation to twentieth-century magical realism. I will study the links between the two seemingly disparate literary modes beginning with Tzvetan Todorov's definition of the fantastic, and then modify it to allow for a more inclusive definition that can encompass the idea of magical realism as an evolved form of the nineteenth-century fantastic. Both the fantastic and magical realism are defined by the juxtaposition of two opposing ontological worlds: the real and the supernatural/magical. However, while the existence of these two opposing ontological worlds generates character and reader hesitation in the nineteenth-century fantastic, in magical realism the hesitation is often shifted to the possible multiple alternative interpretations regarding the events being narrated. In studying the evolution of fantastic literature from the nineteenth century to the present day, I will explore its origins in Gothic literature, its adaption to the twentieth century by foregrounding ontological concerns and utilizing metafictional strategies, its evolution into magical realism while still incorporating elements of the Gothic and fantastic, and its

expansion to new geographical frontiers. A significant thread in this history is the charge of the sublime, particularly as it is formulated by Burke and Kant, as a form of negative pleasure and one that is strongly associated with terror. These various strands are studied through the analysis of short Gothic fiction by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, Carmen Martín Gaité's *The Back Room*, Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, Jack Hodgins's *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*, Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

Acknowledgments

I could not have completed this project without the patience and guidance of my supervisor, Professor Lucia Boldrini, who has always answered my emails and queries as promptly and thoroughly as possible. I will forever be indebted to my parents, both of whom did not live long enough to see me finish this study, but whom I hope would be proud of me now. Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Yasser El Askary, for his continuing love and support without which I could not have completed this project.

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Introduction

Like the spectral figures that haunt Gothic and fantastic works, the fantastic has itself continually haunted the modern novel since the emergence of Gothic fiction, with its popularization of ghostly horror stories that were readily consumed by the mass reading public. This literary “haunting” began with the Gothic, which, with its focus on the darker recesses of man’s nature and its glorification of the supernatural and unreal, was the anti-thesis of the realist novel that had emerged in the eighteenth century. Some of the greatest works of the fantastic, such as Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) and Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) were written during the height of the modern realist novel in the nineteenth century. As the novel continued to develop towards introspection and the inquiry into the representation of the subject in the twentieth century, so too did the forms that the fantastic took, as we find in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (1915) and Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928), finally culminating, in the second half of the century, in the boom of magical realism, a phenomenon usually associated with postmodernism and postcolonialism. The aim of this thesis is to follow and explore the evolution of fantastic literature as it treads in the gigantic shadow of realism—both utilizing and subverting its codes and conventions—and in particular in its evolution into magical realism.

In this introduction I will present the various critical definitions of the fantastic and of magical realism, considering where these overlap or diverge, as well as introduce the notion of the sublime and how it relates to the fantastic and magical realist texts. This will allow me to lay the foundations of my main thesis: that magical realism should be seen as an evolved and adapted form of the nineteenth-century fantastic.

Defining the Fantastic

Tzvetan Todorov proposed the first and most significant definition of the fantastic in his seminal book, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973). Todorov begins his discussion by defining it within a spectrum that has the uncanny at one end and the marvellous at the other. In the middle lies the pure fantastic. Todorov describes this tripartite spectrum as follows:

In a world that is indeed our world [...] there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences this event must opt for one of two possible solutions: he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination [...] or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. (25)

The first option applies to what Todorov calls the uncanny: something that appears inexplicable but for which a rational explanation is offered; the second applies to the marvellous: something whose only possible explanation is supernatural or magical. As for the fantastic, it

occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event. (25)

Todorov's definition of the fantastic is thus highly contingent on its ephemeral nature, only lasting for a moment in most texts before the supernatural event concludes and is revealed

as either uncanny or marvellous. For a text to be defined as fantastic the hesitation must never be dissolved and must remain until the end, and three conditions must be fulfilled:

First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character [...] Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations. These three requirements do not have an equal value. The first and third actually constitute the genre; the second may not be fulfilled. (33)

For Todorov, then, the fantastic must maintain a precarious balance between two possible interpretations, the real and the unreal, to sustain the reader's hesitation to the end. Thus, "The fantastic therefore leads a life full of dangers, and may evaporate at any moment. It seems to be located on the frontier of two genres, the marvellous and the uncanny, rather than to be an autonomous genre" (41).

Since the publication of Todorov's study, every critic of the fantastic has to some degree found the need to respond to it. Consequently, the field can be divided into two groups: those that accept all or most of Todorov's definition, and those that partially or wholly reject it as too restrictive and limiting. Among the former, and recognized as one of the main theorists of the fantastic, is Christine Brooke-Rose. In her study *The Rhetoric of the Unreal* (1981), Brooke-Rose does not deviate significantly from Todorov's definition but begins her own exploration of the fantastic by critiquing Todorov's theories, particularly his categorisation of the fantastic as a genre defined by its precarious balance: "What it means in effect is that the pure fantastic is not so much an evanescent *genre* as an evanescent *element*; the hesitation as to the supernatural can last a short or a long moment and disappear with an explanation" (64).

For many critics of the fantastic, however, Todorov's definition, with its insistence on the sustained character hesitation from beginning to end as the defining criterion, is an all too limiting formulation. Eric S. Rabkin in *The Fantastic in Literature* (1976) and Kathryn Hume in *Fantasy and Mimesis* (1984) take their definitions to the opposite extreme by eroding the distinction between the fantastic and fantasy, and broadly defining the fantastic as that which includes any type of fantasy. Rabkin essentially argues that the fantastic can be measured not in relation to the rules of the real world (whether we believe in the existence of the supernatural or not) but only in relation to the rules created within the fictional world, rules that are suddenly departed from: "Every work of art sets up its own ground rule. The perspectives that the fantastic contradicts are perspectives legitimized by their internal ground rules" (4-5). Hence, "One of the key distinguishing marks of the fantastic is that the perspectives enforced by the ground rules of a narrative world must be diametrically contradicted" (8). To illustrate this point Rabkin uses the example of *Alice in Wonderland*, in which the ground rules of the text are already set in opposition to our given rules of reality. In the topsy-turvy world of *Alice*, in which the fantastical is the norm, a truly fantastical event is when the reader, who expects something fantastical to occur, is unexpectedly faced with a normal event: "Quite early in *Alice in Wonderland*, just as soon as we've gotten used to the flip-flops of the ground rules, and perhaps made a rule of flip-flops themselves, we get a flop-flip" (36). Rabkin uses the scene in which Alice eats a cake and expects her head to grow, but is surprised when it remains the same size. The narrator comments: "to be sure, this is what generally happens when one eats cake; but Alice had got so much into the way of expecting nothing but out-of-the-way things to happen, that it seemed quite dull and stupid for life to go on in the common way" (37). This leads to a much more inclusive definition of the fantastic than Todorov's, in that it assumes that elements of

the fantastic can potentially occur in the narrative fabric of any fictional text. Rabkin states that “the fantastic has a place in any narrative genre, but that genre to which the fantastic is exhaustively central is the class of narratives we call Fantasy” (29). I would argue, however, that this abolition of any distinctions between true fantastic texts and other types of texts is in fact unhelpful, as it cannot differentiate between fantasy, or what Todorov would call the marvellous, and the fantastic. Instead Rabkin proposes that “we consider narratives as arrayed along a continuum, ordered in terms of increasing use of the fantastic, with true Fantasies as the polar extreme” (28). Thus, the fantastic can exist in uncanny, marvellous or any other type of text, so long as the internal ground rules of the narrative are contradicted by unexpected dramatic reversals.

Kathryn Hume, like Rabkin, does not differentiate between fantasy and the fantastic, defining fantasy very broadly as “any departure from consensus reality, an impulse native to literature and manifested in innumerable variations, from monster to metaphor. It includes transgressions of what one generally takes to be physical facts such as human immortality, travel faster than light, telekinesis, and the like” (21). She defines the fantastic as being an “impulse” of fantasy, just as important as and equal to the mimetic impulse (27). For Hume, anything that goes outside the borders of what we consider possible in the real world constitutes fantasy or the fantastic, as well as any deviations from the norm, such as pornography and science fiction.

While Rabkin and Hume collapse the distinction between fantastic and fantasy, I believe that the distinction is necessary, and it is central to a proper understanding of the subject of this study. The major difference between the fantastic and fantasy is in their relation to the real world: the true fantastic (as defined by Todorov, Brooke-Rose, and this

study) is always in a symbiotic relationship with reality, whereas fantasy creates its own reality or world, which is not governed by the laws of our world. Thus, fantasy is a mode of literature in which, as Amaryll Chanady argues in *The Fantastic and Magical Realism*, only “one code of reality” or one world-view exists: it posits a world completely removed from what one would consider the real world (to which it can have an allegorical relation, but with which it does not directly engage). This is especially significant in that fantasy plays a very different critical role from the fantastic in the examination of reality. The fantastic is, as Chanady defines it, a text in which “two codes of reality” or two conflicting world-views are juxtaposed. This link is necessary for the hesitation that Todorov describes, insofar as the tension derives precisely from a contrast between our rational understanding and construction of the world we inhabit, and the inexplicable phenomena that are observed in it in the fantastic text—an effect that would be voided by the removal of these events to a fantasy world. As a result, fantastic texts are much more challenging (and frustrating) for readers, forcing them to constantly re-examine and re-evaluate the nature of reality and of fictive reality, and the way we read and process texts.

Brooke-Rose, in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, also emphasizes the link between the fantastic and reality, and states that “all types of fantastic, whether uncanny, pure fantastic or marvellous (or merged), need to be solidly anchored in some kind of fictionally mimed ‘reality’, not only to be as plausible as possible within the implausible, but to emphasize the contrast between the natural and supernatural elements” (234). As we have seen, for Chanady, both the fantastic and magical realism are modes of literature in which “two levels of reality” exist simultaneously. Concerning the former (we shall look at the latter later on), she states: “In the fantastic [...] the dominant world-view of the text is very similar to our

own, and the laws of verisimilitude coincide largely with our own. Against the background of this logical world, the narrator introduces a level of reality which rational man cannot accept” (5).

While the fantastic depends on this link with reality (and with the literary form of realism), fantasy breaks this formal link, revising the ground rules that we expect to obtain in the world as we know it. For example, in *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy*, W.R. Irwin defines fantasy as “a story based on and controlled by a overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility, it is the narrative result of transforming the condition contrary to fact into ‘fact itself’” (4). That is, the world of fantasy replaces the laws of the real world with, for example, those of fairyland. In “On Fairy Stories”, J.R.R. Tolkien, a major writer of fantasy fiction, similarly defines the writing of fairy stories as “sub-creation”, the creation of a secondary world with its own rules and laws. If an author can create a fully-realized and consistent secondary world that exists with its own laws, the reader’s disbelief can be suspended, whether they be adult or child. This world has, as Tolkien calls it, the “inner consistency of reality” (88). Furthermore, Irwin argues that central to fantasy is a rhetoric that will ensure the reader’s willing participation in the game of fantasy-making: “The controlled interplay between the representation and reader’s credence” is what “makes it necessary for the fantasist to embody in his work a rhetoric that will secure persuasion and make the reader’s acceptance a part of the pleasure” (41). Thus, not only does fantasy create its own world with its own internal rules, it actively facilitates the reader’s acceptance of that fairy world by using persuasive rhetoric to create a harmonious world. The rhetoric used by fantastic and magical realist writers on the other hand does just the opposite, in that they always aim to place the reader in doubt, to cause him or her to

hesitate about what is being narrated, thereby constantly subverting the illusion of realism.

As Irwin goes on to state:

Fantasy relies on discrimination between possible and impossible events that is clearly conceived, even though it may not rely on evidence. Any obscuring of this discrimination precludes fantasy [...] The same may be said of any story which leaves the suggestion that, despite convention, the pretended impossible is valid and should replace the established exception. Fantasy is not in this way subversive, however much it may be so in others. (90)

Irwin addresses Todorov's definition of the fantastic directly, observing that

the writer of fantasy avoids prompting these hesitations, uncertainties, and perceptions of ambiguity that Todorov takes to be essential to the experience of fantastic literature. In successful fantasy all is clarity and certainty as far as presentation goes. Thus fantasy, though often using the same material, moves in a direction opposite to that of fantastic literature. (55)

Thus, although the fantastic and fantasy may both include elements of the supernatural and/or magical phenomena, in fantasy these elements are consistent with the world created, whereas in the fantastic they conflict with the perspectives of the world depicted—that is, our world as we know it.

Defining Magical Realism

As the fantastic evolved during the twentieth century, the tension between the possible natural (or uncanny) and supernatural (or marvellous) explanations of the fantastic is replaced in magical realism by a simultaneous co-existence and acceptance of the two worlds. Thus if the fantastic is based on an "either/or" relation, in magical realism it becomes one of "both/and".

The term magical realism was first introduced by Franz Roh in 1925 in his essay “Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism”, to define the new direction taken by Post-Expressionist painters towards more realistic representation. Speaking of magical realism in painting, Roh states: “with the word ‘magical,’ as opposed to ‘mystical,’ I wish to indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it” (15). In “On the Marvellous Real in America” (1949), Alejo Carpentier defines the truly marvellous as that which

arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), from a privileged revelation of reality, an unaccustomed insight that is singularly favoured by the unexpected richness of reality or an amplification of the scale and categories of reality, perceived with particular intensity by virtue of an exaltation of the spirit that leads to a kind of extreme state. (86)

After the mid-century and the international boom that extended from South America across such varied geographies as India, Canada, Japan, Europe, and North America, magical realism can no longer be seen as a form of writing belonging to any particular group of regional writers. Instead it has become a global postmodern phenomenon bringing together authors from the most varied geographic, historic, and literary backgrounds. Amaryll Chanady and Wendy B. Faris, two major theorists of the form, explore the nature of magical realism as a distinct mode of writing with a set of particular characteristics, and, in Chanady’s case, comparing and contrasting it to its nineteenth-century predecessor, the fantastic.

In *The Fantastic and Magical Realism* (1985), Chanady defines magical realism as a mode of writing “characterized first of all by two conflicting, but autonomously coherent perspectives, one based on an ‘enlightened’ and rational view of reality, and the other on

the acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality” (21-22). To Todorov’s “hesitation,” which she views as a reader’s reaction to a text, she prefers the word “antinomy” to describe the “simultaneous presence of two conflicting codes in the text” (12). Chanady argues that the magical realist writer “abolishes the antinomy between the natural and the supernatural on the level of textual representation, and the reader, who recognizes the two conflicting logical codes on the semantic level, suspends his judgment of what is rational and what is irrational in the fictitious world” (25-26). That is, the magical realist writer does not distinguish between the real and the unreal during the course of the narrative, thus normalizing the magical phenomena that take place. Chanady defines this act by the writer as “authorial reticence”, “or the absence of obvious judgments about the veracity of the events and the authenticity of the world view expressed by characters in the text” (30). It is important to note that in using the term “*authorial reticence*” to refer to the *narrator’s* absence of judgment during the narration, Chanady is—at this early stage in her argument—referring to the author’s choice to not use the narrator as a vehicle for authorial commentary. For Chanady, authorial reticence facilitates the reader’s acceptance of the supernatural because it “integrates the supernatural into the code of the natural, which must redefine its borders” (30).

In *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (2004), Faris defines magical realism as a mode of literature that “combines realism with the fantastic so that the marvellous seems to grow organically with the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them” (1). She then provides what for her are five primary characteristics of magical realism:

First, the texts contains an 'irreducible element' of magic; second the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and, finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity. (7)

Faris defines the "irreducible element" of magic as something unexplainable according to Western empirical knowledge, but which is described in the same way in which ordinary events are recounted (7). This echoes Chanady's idea of authorial reticence, and the way in which the events of the story, both magical and ordinary, are levelled to the same narrative plane. For Faris, however, although the magical and ordinary coexist simultaneously within the same narrative, "the magic in these texts refuses to be assimilated into their realism; it does not brutally shock but neither does it melt away, so that it is like a grain of sand in the oyster of that realism" (8). The magic in magical realism, then, does maintain a subversive stance in relation to the very realism it seemingly merges with, just as the intrusion of the supernatural in the nineteenth-century fantastic disrupts and subverts the mimetic conventions of realism—although they go about it differently: the fantastic maintains its subversive stance by presenting two possible alternatives that unsettle the reader, unable to decide between the two, while in magical realism the reader is forced to accept the co-existence of the supernatural within the "real" world, which is also unsettling. We will return to Faris's five characteristics of magical realism in more detail in the third and fourth chapters.

This review of the principal definitions of the fantastic and the magical realist forms shows the significant affinities that exist between them, and points to their evolving

historical relationship throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To support this continuity, I wish to propose a slight modification of Todorov's definition of the fantastic that allows it to encompass other forms, such as magical realism, without eroding the distinctions that, as I have argued, set it apart from fantasy. Rather than insist that character and reader hesitation be a necessary *condition* for the fantastic, I propose that we should consider them to be *characteristics* that may or may not exist in works of the fantastic (magical realism included). Secondly, that the nature of the hesitation generated in magical realism is often between multiple alternative interpretations rather than between just two interpretations (the uncanny versus the marvellous) found in the classic fantastic. The defining feature and condition of the fantastic should be the existence of double or multiple and opposing codes of reality (in the fantastic there is usually just the juxtaposition of the real versus the unreal, whereas in magical realism we often find multiple opposing alternative realities at work). As we will see in the chapters on Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, very often, during specific episodes in these texts, some of the characters experience moments of hesitation in the face of extraordinary and/or magical events. As for reader hesitation, a further modification must be made in the nature of the *type* of reader hesitation that is generated. In magical realist works—particularly, as we shall see, in those that deal with historical transgressions, such as Carmen Martín Gaité's *The Back Room*, *The House of the Spirits*, and *Midnight's Children*)—we find that the reader's hesitation shifts from how to interpret a supernatural/magical event (as either uncanny or marvellous) to the interpretation of alternative stories, for example between the "official" versions of events enforced by those in power and the ones embraced by those that are in opposition to it.

Another type of reader hesitation often generated by magical realist texts is the ontological hesitation that occurs as a result of what Faris identifies as the fourth and fifth characteristics of magical realism: the merging of realms, and disruptions of time, space, and identity. In *The Back Room*, for example, the author/narrator's constant shifting between the past and the present, her discussions with younger versions of herself, and the discovery of letters and writings from the past that unfold in the present, all cause the reader to hesitate as the ontological stability of the world of the novel is constantly undermined. As we shall see, we also find versions of this type of ontological instability resulting in reader hesitation in the specific episodes of *Nights at the Circus* and *Midnight's Children* that take place in Siberia and the Jungle respectively, and which I will discuss in my final chapter. As Faris aptly states,

The interchange in magical realism between different worlds and kinds of discourse is embodied on a larger scale than that of linguistic magic in what we might call a two-way street phenomenon. This verbal traffic manoeuvre arranges events or objects in the text along an imaginary spectrum running from the improbable to the impossible, or, in other words, from uncanny to the marvellous and back again, concentrating its energies near the mid-point. The spectrum ranges from events that are not impossible but so improbable as to be nearly magic to magical occurrences that are nearly real, so that effect is to blend those two worlds; in some instances near the middle it is virtually impossible to decide to which end of the spectrum an event belongs. (116)

Rather than Todorov's limiting spectrum of the fantastic, in which the fantastic exists only so long as it sustains its precarious balance between the uncanny and the marvellous, the idea that the fantastic can be located at any point across the spectrum from the uncanny to the marvellous once again allows the new definition of the fantastic to include a variety of different types and degrees of reader and character hesitation. This new perspective on the

fantastic allows us to create a definition of the fantastic that is rigorous, yet adaptable enough to emphasize the lines of continuity between the different forms that these relationships between the natural and the supernatural take across history.

If we accept these modifications of Todorov's criterion of hesitation, his third criterion—that “the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as ‘poetic’ interpretations” (33)—becomes directly applicable to both the classic or “pure” fantastic and to magical realism, thus strengthening my argument that magical realism can be seen as a direct descendent of the nineteenth-century fantastic. In magical realism, the magical events that occur are presented as straightforward facts of the narrative, not meant to be interpreted in any other way than as they are presented within the world of the text.

The Sublime

Another aspect of the fantastic that I will explore in chapters one, four, and five and which will further illustrate the links between the fantastic and magical realism is the theme of the sublime, which I believe runs throughout fantastic literature, from the Gothic to magical realism. The sublime has often been discussed in relation to Gothic literature, with its dark labyrinthine interiors, archetypal characters, and themes of incest and sexual violence, which have been given new depth by psychological interpretations.¹ What I wish to add to the existing discussion is the exploration of the sublime in relation to fantastic and

¹ See David Punter's *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*, and Coral Ann Howells's *Love, Mystery, and Misery: Feeling in Gothic Fiction*.

magical realist works, to show how the strong charge of the sublime runs throughout the historical trajectory of the fantastic.

I will start by briefly outlining some of the fundamental theorists of the sublime. Along the rise of Gothic literature, the eighteenth-century also saw the development of a discourse of the sublime, prompted by the French translation in 1765 of the Greek philosopher Dionysius Longinus's *On Sublimity*. Longinus's work focused on the sublime as an exalted form of rhetoric that distinguished orators should aspire to. The first attempt at a comprehensive theory of the sublime, Longinus's work established certain aspects of the sublime that remain to this day. For Longinus the sublime was something indeterminate, powerful, and which could not be learnt. Directly relevant to our particular discussion is his belief that the strength of the sublime lies in *concealing* its dependency on language (15). Longinus, fearing the debilitating effects of the "materiality" of words upon effectively conveying a sense of the sublime, argues that the ephemeral nature of the sublime must be preserved either through adequate concealment of any unnecessary artifice in language, or silence (17).

In the eighteenth century, theorists of the sublime drew from Longinus's work and expanded upon it. To Longinus's rhetorical sublime, which concerns the language employed by the orator or writer, theorists added the natural sublime, believed to exist in objects in the external world (28). The two most influential eighteenth-century works in this regard are Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790). Since any attempt to discuss either of these works thoroughly would go beyond the scope of this dissertation, I will only focus on those points that are directly relevant to the discussion of fantastic works.

There are three main points in Burke's argument that I would like to examine: that the source of the sublime lies in anything that is "analogous" to terror (36); that that which is truly terrifying, and consequently sublime, is precisely so because it is incomprehensible to the mind; and that it is the unique combinatory power of language that can convey a sense of the sublime (158). To use Burke's own example, a reader enjoys reading a terrifying (or Gothic) story precisely because he gets to experience temporarily the proximity of danger and terror. The tale is so terrifying, however, that he is unable to comprehend or communicate his horror and fear. For Burke, this is a prime example of the experience of the sublime derived from a language that combines words to create the air of danger, power, fear, and/or terror.

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant sets out the criteria by which that which is beautiful or sublime should be defined and judged. The beautiful is concerned with the "form of an object", whereas the sublime is "to be found in an object devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of *limitless-ness*, yet with a super-added thought of its totality" (75). Philip Shaw, in *The Sublime*, points out another crucial distinction that Kant makes between the beautiful and the sublime:

'whereas natural beauty' provides judgment with an echo of its own capacity for self-determination, so that nature appears 'preadapted' or 'purposive' to this faculty, the sublime, by contrast, appears to frustrate judgment, to the extent of calling its autonomy into question. The sublime, in short, is presented here as an affront or 'outrage' to our powers of comprehension. (78)

Despite its "frustrating" qualities, Kant describes the sublime as that which points to the primacy of reason and its independence from nature. The Kantian sublime produces a "negative pleasure" derived from objects that both attract and repel the mind, producing a feeling of "respect and admiration", rather than just sensory pleasure (Shaw 98).

A major aspect of my study of the fantastic consists in exploring how the sublime, as an aesthetic discourse, and the fantastic, as a literary mode, share various similar characteristics that, when examined in conjunction, reveal the intimate relationship that exists between the two. Despite what I find to be a strong link between the sublime and works of the Gothic, fantastic, and magical realism, there is not a substantial amount of critical work that focuses on the links between fantastic/magical realist works and the sublime. The most notable examples that focus on and explore this topic directly are: Vijay Mishra's *The Gothic Sublime*, Jack G. Voller's *The Supernatural Sublime*, David Sandner's *Critical Discourses of the Fantastic*, and most recently, Kim Sasser's MA thesis, *The Magical Sublime: A New-Old Lens on Magical Realism*.² Mishra's study focuses only on Gothic works of fiction, while Voller's study focuses on the sublime in fantastic works of prose and poetry within Anglo-American Romanticism. Sandner's *Critical Discourses of the Fantastic* dedicates a chapter to exploring the relationship of the sublime to the fantastic, and, like Voller, he limits his discussion only to the fantastic works of Romanticism, an era which, Sandner argues, is both the origin and end of the fantastic (1). Thus, although these three critical works, like Todorov's, limit their discussions of the fantastic to works that belong to the Gothic and Romantic literary eras, they draw very useful comparisons between the fantastic and the sublime as literary and aesthetic discourses, and it is to these that I now turn.

Although Voller examines the sublime and its relation to the literary works of terror from the Gothic and Romantic eras, much of his argument on the supernatural sublime is relevant to the current discussion on the role of the sublime in magical realism. As Voller

² Kim Sasser's thesis focuses exclusively on the workings of the sublime in magical realist texts, particularly on texts that deal with post-colonialism, historical transgressions (i.e. slavery, and Nazism), and issues of nationhood.

cites from Robert D. Hume, “The Romantics, writing in Gothic fiction’s maturity and aftermath, would discard the supernatural sublime in favour of the transforming imagination, which ‘recasts the object of the exterior world into a new and more profoundly ‘true’ reality, giving the materials with which it chooses to work a unity and meaning which they do not possess in their original form’” (39).³As we will see later in the dissertation, in the twentieth century, magical realist writers return to the supernatural sublime because of the very affinities that exist between what Faris calls the “irreducible element” of magic and the sublime. The sublime, particularly in its negative aspects of absence and terror, provides the writers of magical realism (with their interest in issues of gender, post-colonialism, and revisiting the historical horrors of the past) with a fitting setting within which they can engage with these challenging issues. Voller and Hume’s words evoke the “transforming imagination” of magical realism as it sheds a new (magical) light on the mundane objects of everyday life, thus endowing “reality” with new meaning and a magical transcendence that stems from *within* the mundane objects themselves. In many ways, therefore, this study, in its exploration of the supernatural sublime in magical realism as a postmodern version of the fantastic, continues where Voller leaves off.

By illustrating the recurrence of the sublime within the different types and phases of the fantastic I intend to offer further support for my argument that magical realism should be seen as a direct descendent of the fantastic, and demonstrate that magical realism’s relationship to the sublime (like the relationship of the sublime to the fantastic before it) is very strongly linked to the ontological transgressions that inevitably occur in any type of fantastic literature, with its juxtaposing of two opposing worlds. If we view the relationship

³ The citation is from Robert D. Hume, “Exuberant Gloom, Existential Agony, and Heroic Despair: Three Varieties of Negative Romanticism,” *The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism*, ed. G.R. Thompson Pullman (Washington: Washington State UP, 1974) 289.

of the fantastic to the sublime as one of symbiosis, we can perhaps better understand how the ontological uncertainty that lies at the heart of the fantastic is intimately linked to the experience of the sublime and vice versa.

Let us look then at the principal ways in which the sublime and the fantastic are structurally similar, and how those similarities appear in the narratives themselves. I will focus in particular on three points: indeterminacy and or/ontological instability, the force of excess (that which is too awesome to comprehend or represent), and the relation to terror.

The ineffable nature of the sublime has always presented a challenge to any theorist attempting to define it. From Longinus to Burke and to Kant, the sublime has often been described as that which conveys a sense of absence and/or indeterminacy. In *The Sublime*, Philip Shaw states that for Longinus “Sublimity is [...] ‘the echo of a noble mind’ and in many instances occurs ‘apart from emotion’ or even ‘verbal expression’” (15). Thus the more effective way of approaching the sublime is via concealment or, even better, silence (15). For Burke, who argues in *A Philosophical Enquiry* that “terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime” (54), “obscurity” (54) is the only way to convey or create a sense of terror. Concealment and silence, obscurity, formlessness, limitless-ness are all concepts that convey the ephemeral and indeterminate nature of the sublime moment. The fantastic and magical realism are also defined by their indeterminacy, as we have seen with Todorov’s definition of the fantastic, which only truly exists as it wavers in that moment of hesitation between a possibly uncanny or possibly marvellous interpretation. Voller makes the comparison between Todorov’s definition of the fantastic “as a hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature,

confronting an apparently supernatural event” (25) and the experience of the supernatural sublime. He argues that

A correspondent structure [to that of the fantastic] informs the supernatural moment. It is immaterial whether the confronted human character believes in the independent existence of the perceived object, for even the most rationalist characters may find themselves experiencing initial doubt. The import of the encounter inheres in the fact that a signifier of the supernatural always induces, in nonparodic texts, a combined rational/emotional movement the pattern of which derives from traditional understandings of the sublime moment with the further aspect, taken from Todorov, of epistemological uncertainty. (21)

The experience of the fantastic is thus found by Voller to be one that follows a similar trajectory to the experience of the sublime. In the latter, the individual is momentarily awed or terrified into speechlessness, his/her mind is unable to grasp the greatness of that which has been encountered, and the individual’s sense of place or significance in the world, as it confronts the greatness of the sublime, is temporarily thrown off balance. For Kant, the mind struggles with its own inadequacy, and the individual’s certainty in the triumph of reason begins to falter, as Kant states: “For the sublime, in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be aroused and called to mind by that very inadequacy itself which does not admit of sensuous presentation” (76). In fantastic texts, the encounter with a supernatural or any other form of fantastical being can trigger an experience of the sublime, particularly if that being is seen as an *uncertain* yet threatening source of terror, awe, or shock. Faris’s proposal on the uncertainty found in magical realism is that: “Perhaps the uncertainty in magical realism [...] not only point[s] toward the general modern and postmodern condition of indeterminacy but also suggests,

in a very general way, the existence of a mysterious realm of the spirit, [...] which inhabits the narrative space of the ineffable in-between” (63). As we will see in chapter five, in the indeterminate wild spaces of the Siberian tundra and the Sunderbans jungle, the magical sublime becomes one of the dominant ways through which Carter and Rushdie gesture towards this “mysterious realm of the spirit”.

The second feature that the sublime shares with the fantastic is the force of excess. I use the phrase “force of excess” because it implies a sense of a charge so powerful (whether positive or negative, it is always powerful) that it threatens to gush forth in a movement of outpouring. In his study *Critical Discourses of the Fantastic*, David Sandner states that,

As categories, both the fantastic and the sublime are radically unstable, pointing not only towards the unknown but also towards the unknowable, the imagination “unbound.” Both the fantastic and the sublime mark excess. The sublime overwhelms by presenting the imagination with what cannot be imagined, what is “too big for its capacity.” The strange encounters and wild impossibilities of fantastic literature—the fantastic images that remain always over-full or empty signifiers, more suggestive than definite—also bewilder and overwhelm the reader.

(33-34)

The passage above illustrates what both the sublime and the fantastic gesture towards and attempt to signify: a meaning beyond that which is represented by the supernatural/fantastical being and/or event presented in the text. The resulting gap between the signifier and the signified is what “overwhelms” the respective audiences of the sublime and the fantastic. Sandner also makes the important point that the similarities between the sublime and the fantastic should not be taken to mean that all experiences of the sublime are fantastic, but that every fantastic experience has the potential of triggering an encounter with the sublime (34). In the chapters that look at the magical realist texts of

Allende, Carter, and Rushdie, I will further discuss how Faris's five defining features of magical realism parallel those of the classic sublime.

The third major similarity that the sublime shares with fantastic types of literature is their relation to terror. As we saw earlier, Burke stressed that it is terror that lies at the very heart of the sublime (54). For Kant, however, although terror could trigger the sublime (as in the case of the *dynamically sublime*⁴), generally the sublime instilled more of a feeling of respect and admiration (76). In his discussion of the dynamic sublime, Kant uses the example of nature as a source of might that has however no "dominion" over us (90): "the aesthetic judgement can only deem nature a might, and so *dynamically sublime* in so far as it is looked upon as an object of fear" (91). For Kant, the dynamic sublime refers not to our response/fear of nature's might, but rather to the positive feelings that arise from contemplating the grandness of mountains, or the vastness of the sea, yet from a safe distance.

Through the rest of this study, I will collect a group of recurring themes related to the sublime that appear from Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" to Martín Gaité's *The Back Room* and the magical realist works of Allende, Carter, and Rushdie, and I will review them in the final chapter to further examine the links between the sublime, the Gothic, the nineteenth-century fantastic, and magical realism.

Conclusion

⁴ In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant defines the dynamically sublime in nature as that which "must be represented as a source of fear (though the converse, that every object that is a source of fear is, in our aesthetic judgment, sublime, does not hold)" (90). Furthermore, "Nature, considered in an aesthetic judgment as might that has no dominion over us, is *dynamically sublime*" (90).

To conclude, I will quickly summarize the four main similarities between the fantastic and magical realism that underpin this study. First, the fantastic and magical realism are defined by the co-mingling of the real and the unreal, consequently they subvert and challenge the codes of realism and what constitutes “reality”. Secondly, because of their dependence on “reality”, they are both distinguishable from the genre of pure fantasy. Thirdly, they often generate character and/or reader hesitation as a result of ontological and epistemological instability. Finally, in both the fantastic and magical realism we find a strong presence/charge of the sublime running throughout its historical trajectory, taking on different forms to adapt to the changes in the fantastic over time.

The first chapter of this study will explore the historical origin of the fantastic in the Gothic, as it develops during the Enlightenment along with the discourse of the sublime. I will briefly look at some of the best examples of classic Gothic and fantastic texts, namely, Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Rappacini’s Daughter” (1844), and Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898).

In the second chapter, I examine Martín Gaité’s *The Back Room* as a twentieth-century example of a pure fantastic text that adheres exactly to Todorov’s conditions and criteria for the pure fantastic and yet develops it beyond the limits that Todorov had imposed on it. The third chapter focuses on Isabel Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* and explores the changes that occur in the fantastic allowing it to evolve into magical realism, while still appropriating the historical Gothic and fantastic motifs and tropes. The fourth chapter looks at a completely different type of fantastic/magical realist hybrid—Jack Hodgins’s *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*—which incorporates the tall tales of the North American frontier to create a blended form of magical realism uniquely suited to the local

topography of Canada's Vancouver Island. The final chapter briefly brings together all the previous literary works for a more in-depth analysis of the theme of the sublime and its relation to magical realism (the magical sublime), looking at specific episodes and locations from Carter's *Nights at the Circus* and Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* that come to symbolize sublime spaces.

The results of these analyses will show that despite its strong associations with Latin American fiction, the roots of magical realism can be traced back to the European Gothic and more importantly to its fantastic successors—not just in its co-mingling of the real and the unreal, but in the way that this juxtaposition of opposing and alternate codes of reality is intimately linked, in all three literary forms, to the discourse of the sublime.

Chapter One

In Search of Origins:

The Gothic, Fantastic, and the Sublime

It [the ‘true sublime’] is a pinnacle of beatitude, bordering upon horror, deformity, madness! An eminence from whence the mind, that dares to look farther is lost! It seems to stand, or rather to waver, between certainty and uncertainty, between security and destruction. It is the point of terror, of undetermined fear, of undetermined power! (Frances Reynolds)⁵

Gothic literature has in recent years attracted renewed critical attention, particularly in relation to postmodern literature with its focus on marginality and its questioning of ontological certainties. Despite its success during the eighteenth century and the popularity of its authors (for example, Horace Walpole, Anne Radcliffe, Clara Reeve), Gothic literature continued to hover at the margins of “proper” literature. Tellingly, two of its most famous authors are women—unsurprisingly, considering that the Gothic seemed to provide women writers with a niche for the most part ignored by mainstream male authors. In the nineteenth century, both female writers, such as the Brontë sisters, Mary Shelley, and even Jane Austen, and male authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry James, would continue to adopt aspects of the Gothic within their fiction. In the introduction to *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, Chris Baldick argues that for European women writers the Gothic “has to do with the relative failure of modern societies to ensure for women the kind of economic, legal, and personal security that are enjoyed as the post-absolutist rights of man” (xxii). The enclosed spaces of tyrannical male authority so central to the Gothic thus come to represent the oppressive domestic sphere to which most women were restricted. For American male authors, however, Baldick argues that the Gothic, with “its preoccupation with the inherited

⁵ Frances Reynolds, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Taste* (1785). Quoted in Philip Shaw’s *The Sublime* (46).

powers and corruptions of feudal aristocracy, and with similar lineages and agencies of archaic authority”, was a reaction to the “pseudo-aristocracies of the American South” (xx).

The complex ontological status of the Gothic, with its inherent dual realities of the natural and supernatural, can be argued to have more in common with postmodern types of literature such as magical realism than with the mainstream realist literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Typical postmodern literary features such as the opening up of multiple realities, ontological levels, and possible interpretations, as well as the fragmentation of the text, can also be traced back to the Gothic. Without going as far as saying that the Gothic was the first to introduce such literary features, it is however fair to argue that it was the first popular genre to formalize these features within its conventions.

In the twentieth century, magical realist writers such as Angela Carter, Isabel Allende and Gabriel García Márquez adopt thematic elements of the Gothic. Before proceeding to examine these, however, it is important to analyze the ways in which the Gothic influenced its closer successors and in particular the nineteenth-century fantastic. Arguably, fantastic literature borrows many of its features—such as juxtaposition of the real and the unreal, the blending of the natural and the supernatural—from the Gothic. This chapter will look at how the Gothic staples of the intrusion of the supernatural, the textual ambiguity that consequently ensues, and the introduction of the sublime in the form of unspeakable terror, are interwoven into the text of Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher”. This will lead me to consider how Gothic literature prefigures the nineteenth-century fantastic, specifically in what is considered to be the fantastic text *par excellence*, James’s *The Turn of the Screw*. The chapter will be divided into three main parts: defining the Gothic within the social and economic atmosphere of the eighteenth century; recurring structural and thematic elements that exist within the Gothic and that continue into the nineteenth-century fantastic; and finally, the significance of the sublime which pervades the world of the Gothic and fantastic. This chapter will thus lay

the foundations of this dissertation's critical study of fantastic literature, its subsequent development, its evolution into twentieth-century Magical Realism, and the way in which the sublime can be seen as the foundational undercurrent that runs throughout this literary trajectory.

1.1 The Birth of the Gothic

It can be argued that the rise of the Gothic novel in the eighteenth century—the century of enlightenment and bourgeois ideals, of reason and religious scepticism, of the foundations for mass capitalism and consumerism—is somewhat of an anomaly. To this day, critics have argued about the nature of the Gothic. For some, Gothic literature is paradoxically both a conservative and subversive form, as is argued by E.J. Clery in *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction 1762-1800* (36), Maggie Kilgour in *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (15), and Markman Ellis in *The History of Gothic Fiction* (23). Gothic literature provided the bourgeoisie with a medium that could both recall a glorious nationalistic past, and expel its own repressed fears of revolution, the poor, female sexuality, and the overwhelming changes occurring in a rapidly evolving society. Subversively, however, Gothic literature as a form rebelled against the dominating bourgeois ideology encapsulated within the restrictive conventions of realism by creating a new type of narrative that juxtaposed the supernatural with the natural, the real with the unreal.

The “beginning” of the Gothic novel is attributed by the majority of critics to the publication of Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* in 1764. Because of the politics surrounding Walpole's family and social position, most critics interpret his appropriation of the medieval Gothic form as a nostalgic and nationalistic embrace of Britain's past. As Markman Ellis argues,

The emergence of gothic fiction represents one of the defining moments when an older chivalric past was idealized at the expense of a classical present. The gothic is [...] presented not as an

error of taste or a corrupting influence, but as a positive attribute. The past is re-evaluated and found to be superior to the present, a process that wears a nostalgic aspect. (23)

Clery argues that the word Goth, as is it came to be used in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, becomes detached from its former association with barbarism, and comes to represent the ancient constitution of Britain (35). Thus, although the term Gothic was sometimes used to symbolize the dark past of feudalism, it also enabled the idealization of a “golden age of innocent liberty” (36).

Beyond the political and nationalistic use of the term, the Gothic is also seen as a reaction to the rapidly changing economic climate and to the beginnings of the industrial revolution that would transform Britain and Europe forever. With the development of increasingly large industrial cities, and, consequently, an expanding working population, the movement from rural to urban life set off an inevitable sequence of changes in every sphere of life. One of these significant changes was the development of a large reading middle class, and the demand for novels. Clery argues that the rise of supernatural fictions such as the Gothic must be seen in relation to the eighteenth century’s “consumer revolution” (5), and adds: “The resistance to representations of the marvellous, with their illusory, irrational appeal, coincides with anxiety over the escalation of ‘unreal needs’” (7). The popular demand for Gothic literature was however accompanied by a strong moral objection to the form, which was seen to promote fanciful and irrational ideas that went against enlightenment principles. As Clery points out, when *The Castle of Otranto* was first published, Walpole’s claim that it was a translation of an old manuscript was readily accepted by critics and readers alike, but when the book was revealed to be a fiction the critics were quick to condemn him for writing what Samuel Johnson described as a “false tale in a cultivated period of learning.” Johnson also condemned Walpole for being “an advocate for re-establishing the barbarous superstitions of Gothic devilism!” (Clery, 53).⁶ For Clery, Walpole’s work posed even more of a threat because of how it combined, for the first time, “a modern work of improbability and convincing realism” (59-60). It is interesting to

⁶ Johnson, Samuel. *Monthly Review*, 32 (May 1765) 394.

note how Clery's description of Gothic fiction strongly parallels the definitions of magical realism that I discussed in the introduction of this study. However, in the eighteenth century, that an enlightened man with an upper-class background such as Walpole should undertake to write a supernatural story was simply unthinkable for many of his contemporaries.

Alongside the political nostalgia that surrounded *Otranto*, the development of the Gothic was supported by another form of nostalgia on a more domestic scale: the modern individual's yearning for a spiritualism that was felt to be under threat with the move from rural to urban life, and with the new emphasis on individualism and capitalism at the expense of community and religion brought about by the industrial revolution. With the loss of the spiritual and physical support of an extended community, the individual experienced a new sense of alienation and loss. The Gothic, with its clear demarcations of good and evil, right and wrong, and the interference of the supernatural world that restores justice and order, allowing good to triumph over evil, was an ideal means to channel the individual's need for a higher power to watch over him or her. A good example of this can be found in *Otranto*, where the ghost of Alphonso the Good destroys Manfred the usurper and his heir Conrad, and helps restore the helpless Theodore to his rightful place as master of Otranto.

In the eighteenth century, the most commonly cited reason for the fascination with Gothic literature was the effect of terror produced on the reader. In the essay "On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror" (1773), Anna Letitia Aikin suggests that the main pleasure derived from reading terror is in reaching a state of the sublime. She elaborates on the positive mental effects of reading Gothic fiction:

A strange and unexpected event awakens the mind, and keeps it on the stretch; and where the agency of invisible beings is introduced, of 'forms unseen, and mightier far than we', our imagination, darting forth, explores with rapture the new world which is laid open to its view, and rejoices in the expansion of its powers. (129)

Through the use of the supernatural and the improbable within the framework of the story, the Gothic is able to expand the reader's imagination to new limits, while allowing the reader to escape the mental confines of everyday life. Using Aiken's essay, Ellis argues that "terror and the supernatural is an issue of epistemology: an opening out of imagination that leads to amazement and bewilderment. In this sense, such scenes must avoid an overly close approximation of ordinary experience (realism) in order to achieve this effect of pleasure in terror" (9). In this way, Gothic literature rebelled against the limiting confines of the dominant realist fiction by providing a form that encompassed the subconscious yet very real fears of the alienated individual lost amidst the upheavals of a greatly altered reality. The terrors of Gothic fiction mimicked, albeit fantastically, the sense that there were powerful yet unseen forces at hand shaping the destiny of a collective society without any regard to individual needs.

The turbulent French Revolution and the subsequent Terror, whose impact was quickly felt across Europe, also helped shape Gothic fiction, acting as a horrifying and bloody muse to Gothic writers everywhere. For Matthew Lewis, who listened to first-hand accounts of the reign of Terror, the French Revolution had an obvious and direct influence on his story *The Monk*. As Ellis points out,

Both in England and France, the collective expression of political will by the mob appeared to conservative commentators to signal the release of darker, irrational, savage forces in the body politic. These notions are colored by a gothic language, as *The Monk* testifies: 'The Rioters heeded nothing but the gratification of their barbarous vengeance'. (82)

In this sense the Gothic can be seen as a conservative form that both held a mirror up to the inner recesses of man's darker potential for savagery and demonism, and yet allowed the bourgeoisie to expel these desires and fears via the medium of literature.

Gothic literature is on the whole a highly conventional form with a set of recurring thematic and stylistic elements that have in recent years been given depth and substance well beyond their literal plot through psychoanalytic, feminist, and other theoretical approaches. Remote geographies,

castles and ruins, decay and death all contribute to the creation of the Gothic landscape, amidst which a weak hero, a helpless naïve heroine, and an aggressive male villain make up—with some, though on the whole limited, variations—the archetypal characters.

A list of the central motifs and themes of the Gothic would include: the castle, or enclosed/isolated space, the intrusion of the supernatural, the perception of the supernatural, and the exploration of the limits of language. Central to a Gothic text is the enclosed space—for example a castle such as that of Otranto (or, in the fantastic, Bly in *The Turn of the Screw*)—constantly intruded upon by the supernatural and/or other factors from the “outside” world. In Walpole’s novel, for example, a host of supernatural events (a giant helmet falls from the sky, walking portraits, doors opening on their own) descend upon the illegitimate house of Manfred to right the wrongs of evil, and to deliver the castle to its rightful heir, Theodore.

These supernatural intrusions are unexplained, and are meant to be read neither allegorically nor metaphorically but literally, thus conforming to Todorov’s definition of the marvellous. They do, however, work as signposts indicating fissures, cracks within the enclosed space of the narrative that reveal those moments in the text that are hard to present effectively within the limited scope of language. In Gothic literature, these moments might include the violation of social taboos, a subconscious nostalgia for a simpler, more innocent past, or the inexpressible fear of isolation, terror, and/or death. In *The Gothic Sublime*, Vijay Mishra argues that in *The Castle of Otranto*, “The marvellous or the supernatural [...] acquire its greatest force whenever radical sexual transgressions are underway” (61). Rape and incest recur. Manfred attempts to marry his dead son’s fiancée Isabella and rapes her, then he attempts to give his own daughter to Isabella’s father so that they each marry the other man’s daughter. Taboos are made all the more explicit by the intrusion of the supernatural that serves to condemn these transgressions, eventually allowing good to triumph over evil. What language is unable to say due to sexual and social taboos is brought to the forefront by the thunderous intrusions of the supernatural forces.

1.1.1 “The Fall of the House of Usher”

Arguably one of the greatest examples of Gothic short fiction is Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839). It is also one of the most successful examples of the way in which the Gothic travels across both time and space, from its early beginnings in seventeenth-century Europe to the Americas in the nineteenth century. Baldick argues that,

If there is one work that announces the true arrival of the Gothic tale, its convincing emergence from cruder beginnings, it is his story ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’. Poe’s deliberate dedication to economy and consistency of effect in his writings produced in his tale a remarkably crystallized pattern for the future of the evolution of Gothic fiction. His new formula involved not only the stripping down of a cumbersome conventional machinery to its essential elements but an accompanying clarification and highlighting of a theme long familiar to Gothic writing [...] that of the decline and extinction of the old family line. (xviii)

“The Fall of the House of Usher” is indeed an example of the Gothic at its best. From the very first few lines as its narrator approaches and beholds the great old house of Usher, the mood of decay and death is communicated through his description of a building that immediately inspires a “sense of insufferable gloom [...] unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible” (85). The house of Usher lacks any of the redeemably poetic features that can be found in other famous grand old houses such as *Jane Eyre’s* Thornfield Hall. The house of Usher, both as a structure and as a family lineage, is beyond salvation and destined for self-destruction, although the reasons for this are never clearly articulated. The inevitability of death and extinction pervades the story from start to finish, linking the decaying house to its last remaining master, Roderick Usher. Both the narrator and the reader are given just one fleeting glimpse of Roderick’s sick twin sister, Lady Madeline, who appears as a ghost-like figure and disappears. A few pages later, Roderick announces his sister’s

death from her unexplainable disease, and her corpse is entombed by the two men in the house itself.

Specific Gothic features are at work in the text, first and foremost the theme of death and decay, linking the house to its inhabitants in a deathly symbiotic relationship. Secondly, and also related to this theme, is how the house itself is given human characteristics. Finally, the textual ambiguity so central to Gothic and fantastic literature is brought to the forefront both overtly by the narrator's constant doubting of his perception of the morbid events that unfold, and covertly, through those points of fissure that manifest themselves physically in the actual house and within the language of the text. In both cases, the effect is an overriding sense of inexplicable death and terror.

The house's anthropomorphism—see for example its windows, described as “vacant and eye-like” (85)—turn the very setting into the villainous figure; its victims are the helpless Roderick and his sister. When describing the peculiarities of his mental illness, Usher can only attribute it to the “terrible” effect of the house:

He was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth—in regard to an influence whose superstitious force was conveyed in terms too shadowy here to be re-stated [...] his family mansion, had, by dint of long sufferance, he said, obtained over his—an effect which the *physique* of the grey walls and turrets, and of the tarn into which they all looked, had, at length, brought about upon the *morale* of his existence. (90)

The passage contains several important indicators of the themes being explored, the first of which is the physically debilitating effect of the actual house on Roderick's psyche. Similarly to what we find in *The Castle of Otranto*, the Gothic structure is linked to ancestral origins and family lineage, and plays a central and active role in the resurrection or destruction of them. In *Otranto*, the castle—by instigating a series of telling supernatural events—helps good triumph over evil by overturning the

illegitimate usurper Manfred, and revealing Theodore to be the rightful master of the castle. In a dramatic reversal of this, the house of Usher brings death upon the ancient line of Usher. A second important theme displayed in the passage above is linked to the ambiguity of perception so prevalent within the story. For example, the narrator describes Roderick as being haunted by “superstitious impressions”, described in terms that are “too shadowy” to be stated. Roderick senses that the house has an evil effect on him and yet is unable to articulate his fears explicitly, as if by doing so he’d be surrendering to the evil force of the house. As the narrator explains, “There were times, indeed, when I thought his unceasingly agitated mind was labouring with some oppressive secret, to divulge which he struggled for the necessary courage” (92). The fantastical nature of such an unexplainable evil force falls well outside the bounds of reason and is hard to communicate; allusions are as far as the text is allowed to go.

Given the centrality of the deliberate blurring of distinctions between the real and the unreal, the natural and the supernatural, the theme of *perception* plays a central role both in setting the tone of doubt, ambiguity, and mystery, and in generating further character and reader hesitation. In “Usher” the narrator frequently doubts his perception of what he sees. At various points he attempts to dismiss his seemingly fanciful impressions of the effects of the house, declaring that it “*must* have been a dream”, or “I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up” (88). In an attempt to discern the exact nature of the many hours spent with Roderick, he finds that “an excited and highly distempered ideality threw a sulphureous lustre over all” (91). In the crucial final scene during a wild and stormy night, the narrator sits reading a story to a highly agitated Roderick. As the story unfolds, the narrator begins to hear things from distant parts of the house that occur parallel to and simultaneously with events occurring in the book he is reading. Descriptions of ripping and cracking noises from the story begin to “echo” from within the house, although he at once concludes that his “excited fancy deceived me” (98). In all these moments, when the character hesitates between his perception of the terrible and supernatural events that occur, we find ourselves within the domain of the fantastic. The overt

ambiguity and hesitation generated are identical to those found in what Todorov calls the pure fantastic. However, when the corpse of Lady Madeline appears in the final scene to drag her brother to his death, the text moves out of the realm of the fantastic and into that of Todorov's marvellous.

Covertly, however, the text presents another form of ambiguity in what it suggests but never articulates, what is unspeakable in language because of the very terror it inspires, and before which the subject naturally shudders and retreats in fear. In his initial view of the house, the narrator points to the power of the mind (which can only articulate itself via the medium of language) to form powerful yet inevitably subjective impressions from even the most seemingly ordinary thing. When his fancy is carried away by the gloomy and terrifying impression of the house and its surrounding environment, he states that "while, beyond doubt, there *are* combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth" (85). Thus, while the mind is able to conceive of the powerful influence of even the most ordinary objects upon us, the actual articulation into words of such a power lies always beyond our grasp. As the narrator states elsewhere, "I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect—in terror" (89). The subject's inability to fully comprehend the nature of the evil force of this house leads to an immobilizing sense of terror that can only be communicable through silence. It is those moments of deafening silence in the face of absolute terror that leads to the "gaps" in the language of Gothic and fantastic texts. Thus, in describing Roderick's fanciful and distorted paintings, the narrator would "in vain endeavour to educe more than a small portion which should lie within the compass of merely written words" (91). A little further on, while still musing on his friend's eccentric musical creations, the narrator observes that "It was, perhaps, the narrow limits to which he thus confined himself upon the guitar, which gave birth, in great measure, to the fantastic nature of his performances" (92). Recalling Jean-François Lyotard's notion of the sublime in defining postmodernism in "Answering the Question: What is Post-modernism?" (96), Roderick's constraining musical style can be seen as a metaphor for the limitations of language, where such a limitation plays both a positive and negative role in the

creative process. Positively, it stimulates the artist to seek to express the inexpressible. Yet negatively, it remains a source of frustration in the artist's inability to go beyond it. In Gothic and fantastic texts the point of fissure is the breaking point of language, where the mind struggles between conceiving of the unnatural and the terrible amidst the natural and the mundane, between articulation and the silence generated by the inexplicable. Like the "barely perceptible fissure" (100) that runs through the actual structure of the house, and which only becomes apparent under the glow of a "blood-red moon" (100) as it widens to the point that the house collapses, we are left with only the "silent" "fragments" of the house of Usher. The physical structure of the house, then, represents the metaphorical breakdown of language into fragments. As we shall see in later chapters, it is the Gothic breakdown of the possibility of coherent expression of the encounter between the natural and the supernatural that will be taken up by postmodern fantastic or magical realist works, to emphasize or *allude* to the loss of totality and of meaning.

1.1.2 "Rappacini's Daughter"

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappacini's Daughter" is another interesting example of Gothic short story that both uses and inverts some of the Gothic conventions mentioned above. In this tale, set in Italy like *Otranto*, the setting shifts from that of the castle to an outdoor garden cultivated by the old professor Rappacini and tended to by his beautiful daughter Beatrice. The hero, Giovanni, is a new neighbour who becomes bewitched by the sight of Beatrice and her strange relationship to the flowers that grow there. The plants, as Giovanni learns, are all poisonous, and Rappacini cultivates them as part of his scientific study. Giovanni is warned to stay away but falls under Beatrice's spell despite his own misgivings. Signalling the continuing presence of the traditional Gothic location despite the story's greater focus on the outdoors, Giovanni's new residence is "a high and gloomy chamber of an old edifice [...] which, in fact, exhibited over its entrance the armorial bearings of a family long since extinct" (133).

Upon first witnessing professor Rappacini amongst the flowers in the garden, Giovanni is struck by his peculiar attitude as “that of one walking among malignant influences such as savage beasts, or deadly snakes, or evil spirits, which, should he allow them one moment of license, would wreak upon him terrible fatality” (135). The same atmosphere of suspense and disbelief is cultivated as that found in *Otranto* and “Usher”. There is a sense of undefined evil that baffles both the hero and the reader. While watching Beatrice tend to one shrub in particular, Giovanni is surprised by her love and attentiveness to it, sharply contrasting her father’s attitude. To Giovanni it seems almost as if the girl and the flower are sisters: “Flower and maiden were different, and yet the same, and fraught with some strange peril in either shape” (136). As in *Otranto* and “Usher”, the hero is quick to dismiss his initial irrational thoughts: “He was surprised and a little ashamed to find how real and matter-of-fact an affair it proved to be, in the first rays of the sun which gilded the dew-drops that hung upon leaf and blossom, while giving a brighter beauty to each rare flower, brought everything within the limits of ordinary experience” (137). What in the “less wholesome glow of moonshine” seemed magical and strange, in the daylight is returned to the realm of everyday life. Despite his initial inexplicable fear at the sight of the professor and his daughter in the strange garden, Giovanni rejoices at his luck at having a garden that would serve “as a symbolic language to keep him in communion with Nature” (137).

During much of the first half of the story, Giovanni continues to watch Beatrice, marvelling at her beauty and her strange effect on the nature around her. In one instance he witnesses the sudden death of a lizard that comes too close to her, and in another, an insect hovering above her falls dead at her feet. These strange events cause him to wonder at her peculiar power: “Beautiful shall I call her, or inexpressibly terrible?” (140). When he finally summons the courage to address her, he throws her a bouquet of flowers from his window, which begins to wither before his disbelieving eyes. Frightened, Giovanni “felt conscious of having put himself, to a certain extent, within the influence of an unintelligible power”, and resolves that a wiser course of action would be “to have

accustomed himself, as far as possible, to the familiar and daylight view of Beatrice—thus bringing her rigidly and systematically within the limits of ordinary experience” (141).

Inevitably however, Giovanni is drawn into her world by her beauty and by an unknown force that pulls him towards her. Similar to Roderick Usher’s feeling of helplessness in the face of an overriding force of evil, Giovanni is helplessly drawn to Beatrice’s fatal beauty:

It mattered not whether she were angel or demon, he was irrevocably within her sphere, and must obey the law that whirled him onward [...] and yet, strange to say, there came across him a sudden doubt whether this intense interest on his part were not delusory; whether it were really of so deep and positive a nature as to justify him in now thrusting himself into an incalculable position; whether it were not merely fantasy of a young man’s brain, only slightly or not at all connected with his heart. (144)

This passage illustrates the experience of disbelief, of conflicting perceptions, already noted for both the reader and the hero in *Otranto* and “Usher”. The difference here lies in the fact that the supernatural power stems not from some unknown force as in Walpole’s novel, or from a house as in Poe’s tale, but from the ethereal beauty of a woman.

Beatrice’s beauty both seduces and deceives Giovanni. Evil comes in the form of a woman who is fatally beautiful, just like the flowers she tends to in the garden. Giovanni, however, in rare moments of clarity, is still able to wonder whether his mind followed his heart, or whether his heart has foolishly fallen prey to his mind’s curiosity. Once again, this tale plays with the Gothic convention so that instead of the evil that stems from death or decay, death comes from all that is symbolic of vitality and life, that is, beauty and nature.

Unlike *Otranto* and “Usher”, which both fall under the category of the marvellous since the supernatural events are never explained in rational terms, “Rappacini’s Daughter” is an example of the uncanny. In the end, it is revealed that Rappacini has indeed been cultivating poisonous flowers that have infected Beatrice. She has become,

through her life-long contact with the flowers, immune to their poison, but has become a source of poison herself. In the final scene, Giovanni, attempting to free her from the poison of the flowers, presents her with an antidote that inevitably leads to her death. A scientific explanation thus resolves what initially seems to be supernatural, and the narrative moves beyond the realm of the marvellous and into that of the uncanny.

In “Rappacini’s Daughter” the language of science is presented as being just as terrible, just as frightening as the language of unreason. The power of science when taken too far leads to isolation and death. On one level, “Rappacini’s Daughter” is about the inability of perceiving beauty as something terrible; on a deeper level, it articulates the nineteenth-century fear of scientific pursuit at the expense of human life. As she is about die, Beatrice bids Giovanni farewell and questions, “Oh, was there not, from the first, more poison in thy nature than in mine?” (157). Perhaps a curious mind hold more evil than the natural poisons that stem from the innocence and beauty of nature.

1.2 The Gothic Continues: *The Turn of the Screw* and the Fantastic

One of the important links between the Gothic and its successor, the fantastic, is the parallel that can be drawn between the two types of Gothic stories—the “unexplained supernatural” (of which *Otranto* and “Usher” are examples), and the “explained supernatural” (most famously exemplified by the novels of Ann Radcliffe and of which “Rappacini’s Daughter” is another example)—and Todorov’s categories of the marvellous and the uncanny. As Clery explains, in the “unexplained supernatural”, the supernatural and improbable really exist, and are not explained away by natural causes. In the “explained supernatural”, the supernatural is evoked along with the air of suspense and fear, until the mystery is solved and the supernatural is naturalized as the product of natural causes (106). Eighteenth-century critics responded differently to the two types. Most critics at the time morally approved of Radcliffe’s style, which allowed readers the freedom to read a supernatural tale and enjoy the experience of terror, resolving it, however, with an ending that

conformed to the enlightenment's faith in reason and empiricism. As Clery states, "The eagerness of the critics's welcome gives the impression almost of relief, as if Radcliffe's innovation gave an opportunity to come to terms with the barbarians at the gates without surrendering the fort" (107). Others, however, such as Walter Scott and S.T. Coleridge, were critical of the quickly naturalized ending, believing that it both compromised the imagination by not allowing it full rein over the events, and never lived up to the reader's purposely heightened expectations.⁷ As Clery states, "the enlightenment endings were eventually condemned as betrayals of the integrity of fiction, a treacherous refusal of the rights of the imagination to construct a world untouched by quotidian laws of probability" (108). Clery's "explained supernatural" and "unexplained supernatural" can be seen to correspond to Todorov's "uncanny" and "marvellous" respectively. As we have seen, in what Todorov calls the "fantastic", the world is indeed as we know it, but its laws are violated by the intrusions of apparent supernatural events, which we do not know how to interpret. The fantastic borrows from the Gothic its fascination with the enclosed space or castle, its focus on the ambiguity of perception, and its preoccupation with the limits of language. Also very importantly, the Gothic and the fantastic are inherently connected to the discourse of the sublime, an aspect that I shall discuss in the last section of this chapter.

I will now examine how specific Gothic themes and motifs are appropriated by the fantastic. In Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, the fantastic story *par excellence*, Gothic themes and motifs are to be found in abundance, emphasizing the continuation and evolution of the Gothic into nineteenth-century literature. To begin with, the setting of Bly at first glance seems to be "a castle of romance inhabited by a rosy sprite", but in fact it "was a big ugly antique but convenient house, embodying a few features of a building still older, half-displaced and half-utilised" (9). It is within and around this large remote house that much of the story takes place, and where the laws of the "real" world are seemingly subverted by the appearance of two ghosts: the former governess, Miss Jessel,

⁷ Coleridge wrote in the *Critical Review*, 2nd ser. II (Aug 1794) 361-72 and Sir Walter Scott in *Quarterly Review*, 3 (May 1810) 344.

and the valet of the house, Peter Quint. The living inhabitants are the housekeeper Mrs. Grose, and the Governess's two young charges Miles and Flora. Communication with anyone in the outside world during the course of the story is very limited, due to a large extent to the Master of the house's instructions not to be bothered in any way with anything, and by the remoteness of the house. Bly then is almost a world unto itself, just as the castle in Otranto and Usher's house are remote spaces detached from the rest of the world.

Moreover, like Gothic texts, *The Turn of the Screw* too focuses on the importance of perception. In *The Turn*, the sustained ambiguity of the story foregrounds questions about what we "see" and its relation to perception and interpretation. When the governess first "sees" a male ghost walking on the tower of Bly, he stares at her, "looking at me hard" and as he turns away he "still markedly fixed me" (17). The governess is transfixed by the man's stare, and in all subsequent encounters, too, the focus is always on not just her "seeing" ghosts, but the ghosts staring back at her. In her second encounter with this ghost, the governess immediately recognizes him: "One step into the room had sufficed; my vision was instantaneous; it was all there. The person looking straight in was the person who had already appeared to me" (19). The governess soon comes to the conclusion that the ghosts intend to get the children and begins to watch the latter intently for any sign of knowledge or recognition: "I was a screen—I was to stand before them. The more I saw the less they would. I began to watch them in a stifled suspense, a disguised tension, that might well, had it continue too long, have turned to something like madness" (27). Significantly, the governess does indeed become a kind of screen for the reader, since it is only through her "vision" that the reader comes in contact with the supernatural. No other character in the book, including Mrs. Grose, confirms or even ever mentions seeing the ghosts, thus maintaining the sustained ambiguity of the story: is the governess seeing real ghosts, or is she imagining them?

The suspense or mystery found in the three Gothic stories I have considered is generated by the character's own disbelief; by the way they initially doubt what they "see". In these texts, the

character's doubts are eventually resolved with the resolution of the mystery itself, either marvellously as in *Otranto* or uncannily as in "Rappacini's Daughter". In *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess quickly becomes certain that she does indeed see ghosts, and that the ghosts are attempting to corrupt the children; yet, in this story, the mystery is never resolved for the reader, thus placing the text squarely within the realm of the fantastic.

Beyond its appropriation of Gothic motifs, I would like to examine *The Turn* in light of Todorov's study and his assertion that James's tale is the best example of the fantastic, and of Shoshana Felman's insightful essay, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation" (1977). Felman moves beyond previous attempts to solve the mystery of the true nature of James's text, and instead focuses not on what is said in the story, but what is intentionally left unsaid.

For Todorov, the ambiguity of *The Turn of the Screw* is sustained even beyond the story itself:

It would be wrong to claim that the fantastic can exist only in a part of the work, for there are certain texts which sustain their ambiguity to the very end, i.e., even beyond the narrative itself. The book closed, the ambiguity persists. A remarkable example is supplied by Henry James's tale "The Turn of the Screw", which does not permit us to determine finally whether ghosts haunt the old estate, or whether we are confronted by the hallucinations of a hysterical governess victimized by the disturbing atmosphere which surrounds her. (43)

The Turn fulfils Todorov's three conditions of the fantastic: the reader's hesitation between a natural or supernatural explanation of events, the character's hesitation, and the rejection of all "poetic" or allegorical readings (33). The governess herself experiences this hesitation at first, as is evident in her many conversations with the housekeeper Mrs. Grose, and in her own thoughts. When the governess first "sees" the male ghost she questions his appearance: "Was there a secret at Bly—a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?" (304). I use this particular example, not only because it illustrates her hesitation, but because it does so by using literary allusions to the two types of Gothic literature previously mentioned—the

unexplained supernatural type exhibited by Walpole, and the explained supernatural of *Jane Eyre*. The significance of this literary allusion to the two types of Gothic stories is how the novel is consciously pointing to the ambiguity that is so central to it. It is the text's way of explicitly stating that the mystery is not meant to be interpreted definitively either uncannily (like in the "explained supernatural") or marvellously (as in the "unexplained supernatural"). The resolution to either of these alternatives would result in the text's departure from the realm of the fantastic. Since *The Turn of the Screw* never conclusively answers the governess's question and maintains the suspended hesitation of the reader, it satisfies the first of Todorov's three conditions of the fantastic. After her initial encounter with the ghost, and after several more encounters with Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, the governess's hesitation diminishes and she becomes certain that they exist. The loss of character hesitation for Todorov, however, does not signal a departure from the fantastic, since it does not "actually constitute the genre" as do the first and third conditions (33). Todorov's third condition that the reader reject all "poetic" or allegorical readings is particularly interesting in light of the various critical interpretations of this text. Any such readings, for Todorov, reduce its potentiality: a Freudian reading reduces it to the realm of the uncanny, whereas a "ghost-story" interpretation places it within the realm of the marvellous. In both cases, the very ambiguity at the heart of James's masterful text is abolished. In a sense, then, the interpretation of the text as fantastic, more than any other interpretation, reflects James's stated intention to write "a piece of ingenuity pure and simple, of cold artistic calculation, an *amulette* to catch those not easily caught [...] the jaded, the disillusioned, the fastidious."⁸

In "Turning the Screw of Interpretation" Felman addresses the Freudian reading of *The Turn of the Screw* and attempts to illustrate how its attempts to penetrate the "silence" of the text impose a univocal meaning on it, thus mimicking the governess's own behaviour, resulting in the literal death of Miles, and the metaphorical death of literature. Thus, instead of a Freudian or supernatural

⁸ Henry James in the Preface to the New York edition of *The Turn of the Screw* (1908), 125.

reading, she proposes a “double reading” (205) that allows one to explore the relationship between letters (or language) and the ghosts and how both point to *silence*.

Felman begins her study by looking at how the Freudian reading instigated by Edmund Wilson⁹ attempts to explicitly articulate that which the story resists articulating, to make the metaphorical literal, thereby falling prey to “vulgarity”.¹⁰

The vulgar, therefore is anything which misses, or falls short of, the dimension of the symbolic, anything which rules out, or excludes, meaning as a loss and as a flight,—anything which strives, in other words, to eliminate from language its inherent silence [...] The vulgarity that James then seeks to avoid above all is that of a language whose discourse is outspoken and forthright and whose reserves of silence have been cut, that of a text inherently *incapable* of silence. (107)

For Felman, then, a Freudian reading of the text does violence to the ambiguity of the text through vulgar literalization. Ambiguity itself is the essential element of *The Turn of the Screw* and elevates it beyond being just another psychological or ghost story, making it into a text that can be more fruitfully interpreted in terms of the ways in which literature attempts to articulate the unconscious.

Felman uses the “purloined letters” of *The Turn*—Miles’s letter of dismissal from school, the governess’s letter to the Master which Miles steals, and her letter to Douglas that tells of her experience of Bly (and which is essentially the story itself)—and the ghosts as examples of “figures of *silence*” (149), to argue that these constitute a “double mystery” (149). Felman demonstrates how the governess’s reading of books and letters are directly related to—and indeed often coincide with—her ghostly sightings, suggesting the possibility that the ghosts represent what *is not said* in the letters: “The suggestion that the ghosts are in fact contained in the letters, that their manifestations have to do with *writing*, is outlined by a remark of the governess herself, concerning

⁹ Edmund Wilson, “The Ambiguity of Henry James” (1938).

¹⁰ James’s comments from the New York Preface to *The Turn of the Screw*: “Portentious evil—how was I to save that, as an intention on the part of my demon spirits, from the drop, the *comparative vulgarity*, inevitably attending, throughout the whole range of possible brief illustration, the offered example, the impaired vice, the cited act, the limited deplorable presentable instance?” (127-128).

Peter Quint: ‘So I saw him as I see the letters I form on this page’” (151). The governess’s quest to uncover the truth and meaning behind the appearance of the ghosts and the extent of the children’s knowledge of these ghosts becomes for Felman an endeavour very similar to that of readers of the story (155). The reader, in essence, becomes an active participant in the quest for truth set up by the text; but since the story ends inconclusively, that truth remains forever beyond our knowledge. As Felman states,

The elimination of uncertainty and doubt, the acquisition of *certainty* and *clearness* about the meaning of what had nonetheless appeared at first to be ambiguous and obscure—the successful culmination [...] of the reading process—is time and again formulated in the text as an epistemological assertion [...] as a claim to *knowledge*. (155)

It is worth pointing out that the frame story by which the novel begins adds to the ambiguity of the narrative, also anticipating the centrality of written texts to the ghostliness of the story. A group of friends are gathered around a fire at Christmas and narrating ghost stories; a young man named Douglas explains in first-person narration that he has in his possession a manuscript written by a former acquaintance of his (the Governess) in which she has written about her time as a governess at Bly. The story of *The Turn of the Screw* is a story within a story, twice removed from its original source, conveyed to the reader through Douglas’s reading of a fading manuscript (5) that he has received from the governess herself many years before.

Felman’s (re)reading of *The Turn* can be seen as a “postmodern” reading of the story because it liberates the text from the univocal and arguably totalizing readings of both the psychoanalytical and supernatural camps, and returns the emphasis back to the original ambiguity of the text—an ambiguity that actually encourages the coexistence of alternatives, and allows for equivocal interpretations. In *The Turn of the Screw: Bewildered Vision*, Terry Heller discusses the changes in post-Lacanian psychoanalysis that cause a shift in the critical perspectives of psychoanalytic readings of the story: “Lacan emphasized that the unconscious mind is inaccessible to the conscious mind in

any ordinary way, but especially by means of language [...] Lacan's work emphasized that the analyst's attempt to interpret such signs [of the unconscious] amounted to putting into language what language has been unable to communicate" (13). Thus, when critics attempt to impose a univocal interpretation to the governess's story they are—as Felman also argued—"speaking for silence" (14). The critics and readers of *The Turn of the Screw* are then exceeding their authority by attempting to impose meaning on the story, just like the governess does to the children.

The fantastic nature of *The Turn of the Screw* points to the problematic nature of language. As in the Gothic, here too there are critical moments when the fissures in the text widen as it wanders into the realm of the inexpressible, where what is sublimated attempts to reveal itself but cannot do so within the limits of language. The unexpressed or unsayable takes two forms: that which the governess cannot and does not want to recognize and put into words; and that which the text itself resists, a single definitive interpretation. Any attempt to force or impose meaning results in the metaphorical death of the text—and of the child— and its definition as a pure fantastic text. When the governess finally attempts to force Miles into "seeing" the ghost, she drives him to his death (85). The governess's certainty, the directed gazes of the ghosts, all further our hesitation—as modern readers we are sceptical about the actual existence of ghosts, and yet the Governess's certainty and the minute descriptions of the ghost's "fixed stares" all cause the reader to hesitate. The terror generated by *The Turn* thus stems from our sustained hesitation and the text's final silence, symbolized by Miles' horrifying death. Since the text itself resists any one interpretation, any attempt to interpret the text in either way deprives it of the sustained ambiguity which, as the text has itself made clear (through its allusions to *Udolpho* and *Jane Eyre*), takes precedence over any one interpretation. The way in which the text continuously resists interpretation is itself related to what the text is actually attempting to reveal, the limits of language in articulating the experience of the sublime, a point I will return to later in this chapter.

There are three crucial points related to the Governess's initial encounter with the male ghost that need to be addressed. Firstly, just before the governess "sees" the ghost, she was thinking of the Master and how she might gain his admiration and approval: "Someone would appear there at the turn of a path and would stand before me and smile and approve [...] I only asked that he should *know*; and the only way to be sure he knew would be to see it, and the kind light of it, in his handsome face" (15). Secondly, she is so absorbed in her thoughts of the Master that upon seeing the figure on the tower, she assumes at first that it is indeed him, and then experiences "a violent perception of the mistake of my first [shock]: the man who met my eyes was not the person I had precipitately supposed. There came to me thus a bewilderment of vision" (16). Thirdly, despite her initial "bewilderment of vision" she becomes absolutely sure that she has indeed seen someone and equates her perception of the supernatural event to the certainty of words on a page: "So I saw him as I see the letters I form on this page" (16). The fact that the governess "sees" the male ghost just as she is thinking of the Master relates back to the point made by Mishra that the supernatural in Gothic fiction is strongest when sexual taboos are being subverted. When the Governess asks Mrs. Grose about the ghosts and describes them to her, she is told that they match the descriptions of the Master's late valet and the previous governess who were thought to have had a scandalous affair. Once again, the existence of the supernatural coincides with a sexual transgression. There is, however, a notable distinction between the ways sexual transgressions are dealt with in *Otranto* and *The Turn*. In the former the rape of Isabella is explicit whereas in the latter the sexual transgression of the valet and governess is only hinted at, as something that is assumed to have happened, in the past. This could be due to the fact that *Otranto* is set in a supposedly barbaric medieval past and distant land, so that no qualms are felt about explicit depictions of sexual transgressions. In *The Turn of the Screw*, however—and no matter how remote Bly is—we are still, after all, in contemporary England; there is a need, therefore, for sublimating the sexual taboos by transferring them to ghosts and associating them to ghostly allusions that may be generated by a diseased psyche. The truth

however remains hovering beneath the surface of the text, inaccessibly hidden beneath the screen of language.

The Governess's initial dubious perception of what she sees soon becomes for her a certainty as the ghost sightings continue. However, the reader's hesitation remains throughout the story since no other character in the story sees the ghosts, and no confirmation of their existence occurs in the frame-story, thus the ambiguity of the fantastic is preserved. The main source of the terror or fear generated by this particular "ghost-story" is not in the potential existence of the ghosts, but in the deliberate and sustained hesitation it generates in the reader, which remains long after the last page has been turned. The death of Miles becomes even more terrifying and tragic an ending because it is the only conclusive finale we get as readers, and in either interpretation (uncanny or marvellous) his death is chilling.

1.3 The Terror of the Sublime

In the epigraph of this chapter, I included a definition of the sublime by Frances Reynolds, who defines "true sublimity" as the point where the distinctions between "certainty and uncertainty" blur and the subject wavers on the precipice of the unknown. This moment is significant in that it signals the limits of human comprehension, and the realization of one's inability to understand that which lies before him/her, and, as such, is a source of great fear and power. Reynolds's words encapsulate much of what has been discussed in this chapter about the limits of language and its inability to represent the terror of death and the unknown, except through silence and fractured speech. She describes the sublime as something beautiful (which calls to mind the beauty of Beatrice), and yet ironically horrifying (as any unexplained supernatural would be). For Reynolds, it is a moment that wavers "between certainty and uncertainty", echoing the theme of perception so prevalent in the Gothic and fantastic examples explored in this chapter. The Gothic in

particular employs the sublime to inspire terror. Beyond this obvious relationship, however, there lies a deeper, more meaningful relationship between all types of the fantastic (Gothic included) and the sublime. The fantastic is perhaps the mode of writing most conducive to expressing the sublime, precisely because it imbues the everyday mundane world with a mysterious glow of fear, magic, and awe.

How does the sublime manifest itself in fantastic texts? This is one of the questions that will be explored throughout the rest of the dissertation through close textual analysis of a selection of magical realist works. However, on the basis of the three examples of the Gothic and fantastic discussed so far we can already conclude that much more is at play beneath the surface of these texts than just the themes of terror, decay, and death. Indeed, the experience of reading a Gothic or fantastic text places emphasis on tone and mood; it *alludes* to dark corners (actual or otherwise) within the crevices of the text, and mysteriously guides the reader down a terrifying path of unrepresentable fears. Giovanni's awe at the sight of Beatrice's poisonous power, the sublime artistry of Roderick's fantastical and fevered imagination, the pointed gazes of the ghosts in *The Turn of the Screw*, are but three examples of the sublime at work. Another is the narrator's description of a greatly altered Roderick:

The now ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now miraculous lustre of the eye, above all things startled and even awed me. The silken hair, too, had been suffered to grow all unheeded, and as in its wild gossamer texture, it floated rather than fell about the face, I could not, even with effort, connect its arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity. (89)

The description of Roderick is in itself sublime. The colour of his skin and the strange light in his eyes, combined with the wildness of his hair leaves the narrator unable to comprehend his friend's situation. That he "could not, even with effort, connect [..., it] with any *idea* of simple humanity", is a failure on the narrator's part to find a language that can accurately represent the strange changes that have occurred to his friend's appearance. This is both a failure of language (of reconciling what we think and feel

about something to the thing itself), and a defining feature of the sublime, its unrepresentability.

In yet another passage, the narrator depicts his reaction to Roderick's paintings:

For me at least—in the circumstances then surrounding me—there arose out of the pure abstractions [...] an intensity of intolerable awe, no shadow of which I ever felt in the contemplation of the certainly glowing yet too concrete reveries of Fuseli. (91)

The reference to Fuseli is significant in the way it illustrates the extent to which Roderick's abstract paintings are shocking: even Fuseli's awe-inspiring and Gothic reveries still make their subjects more concrete than Roderick's. Finally the unrepresentability of the sublime is displayed here in how the narrator attempts to communicate the truth of Roderick's undefined ("formless") condition:

"The result was discoverable, he added, in that silent, yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made him what I now saw him—what he was" (94). Although the narrator is attempting to verbalize what has caused the near extinction of the house of Usher, nothing is explicitly said. The narrator is only able to allude to the dark and *silent* forces that are shaping this doomed family, and to what his friend has become; that is never precisely put into words either. Likewise, in *The Turn of the Screw*, the Governess, referring to her ghostly sightings, states: "Nothing was more natural than that these things should be the other things that they absolutely were not" (35), thus illustrating even her reluctance to put into clear words the evil superstitions of which she is gradually becoming sure.

The sublime is unsayable, unrepresentable, and incomprehensible. It works negatively by emphasizing the inevitable limitations of language, and highlighting our inability to comprehend such an experience to its fullest extent. The sublime moment, however, in its awe-inspiring power, contains within itself a transcendent positivity that arouses and compels the imagination to continue to try to give voice to silence, to

represent—as Lyotard would say of the postmodern (96)—that which is ultimately unrepresentable, and to find form in formlessness. In its inherent paradoxes and its ability to provide transcendence within even the most mundane things, the sublime presents itself as the perfect complement to the fantastic. The fantastic attempts to mimic the experience of the sublime by creating a multi-levelled reality in which the possibility of transcendence, wonder, or the supernatural can still exist in the post-Enlightenment world. In such sublime moments, the world is suddenly cast aglow with a new light that temporarily creates a shift in perspective and meaning, one that is perhaps more thoroughly encompassed within the worlds of the fantastic than any other mode of writing.

Chapter Two
The Modern Fantastic:
The Back Room

“When you cross that border between what you know is true
and what you’re no longer sure of, anything is possible” - Carmen Martín Gaité

Fantastic literature is first and foremost a literature of alternatives: alternative realities, histories, and modes of writing. It can be argued that this is true of most types of literature. However, in the fantastic alternative readings, the doubling/paralleling of characters, the sustained hesitation, and the pervasive ambiguity—all serve to disturb the complacency of the reader, and to disrupt preconceived ideas of any absolute “reality”. Fantastic literature also allows for a more inclusive narrative that can encompass the possibility of subjective experiences, from the terrors of the unknown or sublime, to a difficult childhood history lived against the backdrop of oppression and war. In this chapter I will attempt to navigate the changes that occur in the twentieth-century fantastic through an analysis of *The Back Room*, published in 1978 by the Spanish writer Carmen Martín Gaité.

Not a well-known work of fiction outside of Spain, it is nevertheless worthy of close attention as a perfect example of a modern fantastic text that adheres to, and even explicitly stages, Todorov's strict definition of the fantastic, while displaying a variety of postmodern features and characteristics that deal with narration, memory, and the writing process. *The Back Room* focuses on both the personal and the public aspects of the Franco era—with the intensely personal retelling of a childhood lived during that period of oppression, and the grand destiny of Spain propounded by the regime's propaganda, in which Spanish women in particular were attributed a central role as guardians of a greatness founded on the restricted ideal of the Christian traditional family. This chapter will analyze *The Back Room* as a pure fantastic text, considering how it utilizes allusions, shifting ontological planes, and hesitation to create an utterly ambiguous modern fantastic text. In the final section the chapter will examine how the fantastic in the twentieth century evolves to include metafictional strategies.

2.1 Tripping Over Todorov

The Back Room begins on a stormy night when the author and narrator, plagued by insomnia, is trying to fall asleep. Unable to do so, she begins to rummage amongst the mementos from the past that clutter her bedroom, and trips on a book that she quickly recognizes as none other than Todorov's *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. She remembers a vow she had made to herself and had written down in a notebook: "I swear I am going to write a fantastic novel" (12). What begins here is the novel-within-the novel, also called *The Back Room*.

Sometime during the night, the narrator manages to fall asleep but is suddenly awakened by the arrival of a mysterious man dressed in black, who claims that she had scheduled an interview with him. The narrator/author is by her own admission disoriented and prone to forgetfulness, and the mysterious interviewer remains a mystery: we are never given any details as to who he is or why he is here; in the end, both the reader and the narrator are left wondering whether the interview that occurs during the course of the novel really takes place. However, the discussion that forms almost the entire story and is guided entirely by the mysterious man encourages the narrator to recall her childhood in Salamanca during the Spanish Civil war, and her formative years lived under the oppressive dictatorship of Franco. The night-long discussion wanders back and forth in time, often prompted by the narrator's memories of popular songs, magazines, and romances of the past. The mysterious interviewer is well informed about her literary career and indirectly questions her on her style of writing and her choice of subjects, eventually leading her to a discussion of her present literary project (or lack thereof, since she has not written anything in a while). The only intrusion from the outside world that disrupts their night-long discussion is a bizarre phone call from a woman looking for a man called Alejandro, who, the caller is sure, is at the narrator's house. The caller tells the narrator of her unrequited love for Alejandro, whom she believes to be in love with the narrator or with a woman whose name starts with the letter C. Thus, it is hinted that the stranger that has turned up in the narrator's house might be this Alejandro, who might also be the author of a love letter the narrator had found amongst the clutter in her room earlier in the narrative. This old letter is from a young man who seems to have once been in love with her, but whom she cannot recall. She admits to having written herself many "apocryphal letters" (16), and so it might be her own; however, the handwriting is not hers. No further concrete details are provided by the text to verify

the caller's whole story, which therefore remains suspended amongst the host of other ambiguities littered throughout the text.

During the course of the surreal night, many other possible (we are never really sure) fantastical events take place, the most significant of which is the appearance of piles of typed pages that begin to accumulate as the discussion develops. As the narrator herself states,

My attention has been arrested by the top of the sheet of paper peeking out above the roller of the typewriter and I am standing there paralyzed. I am so dumbfounded I am almost terrified. The phrase referring to the man on the beach has disappeared, replaced by the incantation that Cervantes's *Gitanilla* used to ward off heart troubles and dizzy spells. [...] there is nothing else written on the page, except for a number in the right-hand corner: 79. But where are the rest of these seventy-nine pages? What are they about? The pile of papers underneath the hat seems to have grown bigger too, though I don't dare check to see. (98)

At the end of the novel, after the stranger has left and the narrator has gone to sleep again and reawakens, she finds on the bed, where Todorov's book had been, a pile of pages labelled *The Back Room*. The book has literally and (perhaps) magically been written during the course of the surreal night.

It is worth looking more closely at the passage quoted above, as there are two significant points to be made. First, that the narrator is herself unsure as to how these pages have miraculously appeared, although she is sure that a phrase she has previously written and which refers to the ex-lover's letter to her have been replaced by a section from Cervantes. Secondly, that the passage from Cervantes that replaces the phrase about the man on the beach (the ex-lover) is a magic spell which she had copied sometime in the past on a piece of paper but had since forgotten. This substitution is significant because during

the course of their discussion, the stranger repeatedly encourages her to dismiss realistic writing and to lose herself in the uncertainty of the fantastic. As he points out, “Fantastic literature has a great deal to do with letters that reappear” (39). The allusion to Cervantes’s *Gitanilla* (and its replacement of a phrase that refers to a “real” event in her past), then, is given as a literary alternative—that of the fantastic—to a realist retelling of her childhood memories. From the very beginning, the novel weaves together realistic and detailed descriptions with dream-like images. For example, the straightforward, concrete description, “I think I’ve always slept this way, with my right arm underneath the pillow and my body turned slightly over onto the side, my feet searching for the place where the sheet is tucked in” (1), is immediately followed by a vision of what the narrator “sees” when she closes her eyes: “I am visited by a long-familiar apparition, always the same: a parade of stars, each with a clown’s face, that go soaring up like a balloon that’s escaped and laugh with a frozen grin, following one after the other in a zigzag pattern, like spirals of smoke gradually becoming thicker and thicker” (1). Thus, from the very start, the novel sets the mood for a fantastic retelling of the narrator’s life, and as the novel progresses the tone of the fantastic becomes more and more pronounced. By the end, the story has come full circle, the author lies in bed reading the opening passages of *The Back Room* and clutches in her hand the only concrete memento she has of the surreal night spent talking with Alejandro, a little gold box of pills he had supposedly given her to help her relax: “I stretch my legs out till they touch the place where the sheet is tucked in, and as I put my right arm underneath the pillow, my fingers encounter a small, cold object [...] As the laughing stars begin to rush by, I have recognized it by the feel of it: it is the little gold box” (215). How the pages of *The Back Room* have come into being and whether or not the whole night with Alejandro occurs or not (and thus, what the actual source of the gold box is) all remain a

mystery, and the novel ends in the complete uncertainty of the fantastic. I would like to end this brief summary of Martín Gaité's novel with a very apt description by Debra A. Castilla, who argues in "Never-Ending Story: Carmen Martín Gaité's *The Back Room*" that "One of the most intriguing aspects of this novel is, perhaps, what it is not. It is a book on memory but definitely not a memoir; a work absolutely faithful to the details of the author's life but not an autobiography; a recuperation of a lost historical past but not a history or straightforward historical fiction" (84). I would argue that what helps Martín Gaité create such a complex and paradoxical work of fiction, historicizing, and surreal dream-work is her use of the mode of the fantastic. It is this that allows her to deconstruct what Patricia Grace King calls, in "There's Always a Dreamed Text': Defying Mythologized History in Carmen Martín Gaité's *El Cuarto de Atrás*", Franco's carefully constructed "univocal, monolithic-mythologized image" (34) of Spain, and to confront "the particular problem of writing a history of those years when history was all but lost to her, was in fact a weapon in the hands of the state" (35). I will return to King's essay when I discuss the novel's use of metafiction within the framework of a modern fantastic text.

Three major aspects of *The Back Room* are thus brought to the foreground that help situate it within the mode of the fantastic. The first two are implicit in what I have just outlined: its intertextuality, the most obvious of which is the allusion to Todorov's book in the story itself; and the ontological instability of the text, switching as it does between different planes of time and space, and whose reality is constantly transformed under the narrator's and the reader's eyes. The third defining feature of the novel is the sustained hesitation for both the character and the reader throughout the story, which, as we know, for Todorov is the most fundamental feature of the fantastic.

2.2 Naming Names: Todorov, Carroll, Kafka, and Cervantes

Literary allusions in the narrative help situate the text within the tradition of the fantastic. Martín Gaité dedicates *The Back Room* to Lewis Carroll, “who still consoles us for being so sensible and welcomes us into his world turned topsy-turvy” (i). In a later passage in the book Carroll is mentioned again when the narrator is engaged in the bizarre phone call with the woman who wants to speak to Alejandro and who seems to be suggesting that Alejandro may be an ex-lover of the narrator. This suggestion opens up such a range of possibilities (that Alejandro is in fact not a stranger at all, and that the letter found earlier in the novel might be a letter from him) that the narrator likens it to Carroll’s topsy-turvy stories, while using a language that clearly continues to reference Todorov’s distinctions: “There is a point where fantastic literature crosses over the threshold of the marvellous, and from then on everything is possible and believable. We are flying through the air as in one of Lewis Carroll’s stories” (169). Carroll’s topsy-turvy fictive world then is used as a model for the type of fiction the narrator aspires to write, set in world in a which a person can be lost in a labyrinth full of magical characters and places, or engage in a conversation with a mysterious person that leads to the creation of a fantastical story freed from the rigid confines of the “real” world of “sensible” people.

Another relevant literary allusion is a print hanging on the narrator’s wall labelled “Luther’s Discussion with the Devil” (10). The narrator describes it in great detail, noting that the figure of Luther seems to make a gesture “that appears to be meant to emphasize words that cannot be heard” (10). The devil is surrounded by books, some of which he rests his feet on. Naturally, the Faustian representation of the devil is the first image to come to

mind; while the picture can be read to refer, metafictionally, to *The Back Room* itself, just as relevant to the story are also the allusions to an earlier novel in which magical events do actually take place: published in 1938, Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* was written during Stalin's oppressive dictatorship in the Soviet Union and, like *The Back Room*, it takes place during the course of one night, in which the devil descends on Moscow causing chaos in the city.¹¹ Unlike *The Back Room*, however, *The Master and Margarita* goes beyond Todorov's limits of the fantastic and corresponds to his definition of the marvellous since actual magical events do occur and are not just given as possible interpretations. Although I have not found direct evidence that Martín Gaité had read Bulgakov's novel, the similarities between the texts are significant in that both introduce elements of the fantastic into narratives about oppressive dictatorships (Stalin's and Franco's), and both are only published after these dictators have passed away. These parallels suggest that different types of the fantastic can provide an effective fictive outlet for writers seeking to understand the cruel absurdities of lives lived under oppressive régimes. I will examine this point further in the next chapter as I discuss Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, another "fantastic" novel written about life under political oppression.

Another crucial and explicit allusion in *The Back Room* is to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, when, early on in the story, as the narrator quickly dresses to meet the stranger, she finds a gigantic cockroach in the hall. Even before seeing it, she feels its presence: "I stop for a few seconds before turning on the light, with a presentiment that a cockroach is going to appear" (20). That she suspects that she will come across a cockroach—and one that "has a source of strength to it. Its plan seems to be to keep me

¹¹ The print of Luther in *The Back Room* evokes the scene in *The Master and Margarita* where Woland (the devil) goes to meet the Master (a writer, loosely based on Bulgakov himself) and encourages him to finish his novel, critical of Stalin's regime (381).

from getting past it" (21)—suggests, firstly that her presentiment followed by the vision of the cockroach may be just a figment of her imagination since her mind is already preoccupied with the writing of a fantastic novel; and secondly, that Kafka's iconic character may be seen to stand in her way as a challenge: to write a fantastic text that can equal or even surpass Kafka's fantastic masterpiece. The first interpretation, in which a presentiment is followed by a vision, also echoes the strong presentiment the Governess feels before seeing the ghosts in *The Turn of the Screw*, which, we have seen, are equally interpretable as figments of her troubled imagination. In dealing with the second interpretation, it must be recalled that for Todorov, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* signals the end of the fantastic:

The nineteenth century transpired, it is true, in a metaphysics of the real and the imaginary, and the literature of the fantastic is nothing but the bad conscience of this positivist era. But today, we can no longer believe in an immutable external reality. Words have gained an autonomy, which things have lost. The literature which has always asserted this other vision is doubtless one of the agencies of such a development. Fantastic literature itself – which on every page subverts linguistic categorization – has received a fatal blow from these very categorizations.

(168)

Indeed, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is a critical turning point in the history of the fantastic, and thus requires a brief digression at this point. The "naturalization" of the fantastic event (Gregor's metamorphosis into a vermin) is indicative of what occurs to fantastic literature during modernism: subjects that had once been "sublimated" in the traditional nineteenth-century fantastic (social alienation, sexuality, paranoia, etc.) are brought to the surface of the text and presented overtly. For Todorov, *The Metamorphosis* is not uncanny, since the supernatural event is not rationalized away in the end as being, for example, a nightmare from which Gregor awakens. Instead, Todorov argues that Kafka's world is

“completely bizarre and just as abnormal as the metamorphosis itself and that it “obeys a logic which has nothing to do with the real world” (181). For Todorov, in the twentieth century, “The ‘normal’ man is precisely the fantastic being; the fantastic becomes the rule, not the exception” (167). What I would like to argue, however, is that instead of signalling the end of the fantastic *The Metamorphosis* marks the beginning of its transformation as it incorporates and accepts the supernatural or magical events within the code of realism without necessarily eliciting doubt or astonishment in the character and/or reader.

Although Todorov does not discuss any, there are other examples that illustrate the fate of the fantastic in modernism; for example, in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, a young male aristocrat magically transforms into a woman; his/her ageing is slowed to the point that he/she, first seen at the time of Elizabeth I, is still alive three centuries later, in 1928 (date of publication of the novel). Both *The Metamorphosis* and *Orlando* go beyond Todorov’s definition of the pure fantastic in naturalizing the fantastic elements within the text. However, if we modify and expand Todorov’s limiting definition of the fantastic as I have suggested in the introduction, the mode of the fantastic is seen to be able to adapt and evolve enough to include magical realist texts. This shift that occurs in the history of the fantastic from the shocking intrusion of the supernatural and the magical to its natural acceptance in works such as *The Metamorphosis*, *Orlando*, and, later on, in magical realist texts, coincides with the radical changes that occur in the early twentieth century. In the past, Gothic and then the fantastic had provided narrative forms through which fears, desires, psychological and social anxieties could be represented; but after Freud had described these fears and desires as the hidden but central and driving force of our psyches, they could no longer be banished to the realm of fantasy, and found their place firmly in

representations of the everyday. The Enlightenment and then nineteenth-century positivist science had taught us that rational understanding of reality was possible and that this would displace the supernatural. In her insightful article “Revising the Two Cultures Debate”, Patricia Waugh presents the critical debates of the 1920s and 1930s between the two cultures of aesthetics (“inexact knowledge”) and science (“exact knowledge”). Waugh discusses how scientific developments in physics destroyed the certainty of the Newtonian world, and points to Werner Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, which questions “the traditional scientific separation of subject and object by suggesting that the interaction between observer and observed ‘causes large changes in the systems being observed’”.¹² Waugh then discusses Neils Bohr’s Principle of Complementarity, which “developed the argument that there is an ineradicable ambiguity in all quantum systems” (41), and Heisenberg’s claim that “there is no picture of nature which is not a picture of our relation to nature [...] Like aesthetic knowing, Uncertainty transforms science too into participant knowing” (42). These two new scientific principles, Waugh argues, undermine the distinction of art and science, and posit questions about the ontology of art (42); they destabilize the very foundations of reason established in modernity, and the idea of the “absoluteness” of science advocated by the Enlightenment thinkers. Suddenly, the intrusion of supernatural and magical beings or events did not seem quite so shocking—in fact they become increasingly appropriate literary tropes with which to depict a radically changing perspective of reality and the world. The shift that occurs from the traditional fantastic to twentieth-century fantastic works like *The Metamorphosis* and *Orlando* is a direct reflection of this changed perspective on reality.

¹² Waugh quotes Heisenberg from Karl Popper, *Quantum Theory and the Schism in Physics*, ed. W.W. Bartley (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 41.

To return to my earlier point, one way of interpreting Martín Gaité's overt allusion to Kafka would be that the cockroach represents the challenge of finding a way to develop the fantastic beyond what Todorov interprets as its end-point. Thus, Martín Gaité's explicit references to both Todorov and Kafka are her way of signalling her desire to write a fantastic text like those which Todorov explores, but one that is more appropriate to the latter end of the twentieth century, and that goes beyond the limits of Todorov's definition of the fantastic.

Just as Martín Gaité uses allusions to Todorov and Kafka to insert her book explicitly into the history and development of the fantastic (while at the same time furthering this development by going beyond the boundaries of Todorov's definition) she likewise makes allusions to Cervantes and Carroll to identify the possible alternatives between which her novel hesitates. Cervantes is a very relevant literary figure in *The Back Room*, not only for his preeminent position within Spanish literature, but also because his own work *Don Quixote* can be considered as a precursor of the fantastic as Don Quixote goes about performing heroic deeds and fighting imagined villains, all of which stem from his own fantasies. Against Quixote's fantastical world, we have the "real" perspective of his peasant servant Sancho, who constantly attempts to clean up the messy situations his master gets into because of his delusional fantasies. Although *Quixote* is not an example of the pure fantastic (we know that the fantastical events that take place are only a figment of Quixote's imagination), the novel, in its juxtaposition of the real versus the unreal world of Sancho and Quixote, anticipates features of the fantastic that would appear in the nineteenth century. Martín Gaité specifically uses the story of the little gypsy girl (the Gitanilla from *Don Quixote*) who makes up an incantation to stop a young admirer of hers becoming dizzy because of her

charm and beauty. The spell itself calls for assurance from God, patience, endurance, and the rejection of ugly suspicions (201). The allusion to the gypsy girl's spell can be interpreted in two ways; when the narrator notices the pile of typed pages on her typewriter that have been replaced by the incantation, she is very disturbed by this event (see the cited passage above), so the spell magically appears to help ward off any dizzying spells she might experience as a result of the bizarre night that ensues (98). Secondly, the spell specifically asks that one should reject ugly suspicions and it is significant that when the narrator sees it where once other pages had existed she immediately suspects that Alejandro might have been the one to replace her previous work with this spell (98). The whole allusion to the incantation thus works as a signal that something fantastical might be taking place, and that, rather than dwell too much on her suspicions, it would be better for her to cast them off and focus more on the good things that might come from her discussion with Alejandro. As the second to last line of the incantation in *Don Quixote* states, "for excellent things will ensue" (Cervantes 201). The spell almost seems like an encouragement to the narrator to give herself up to the possibilities of the fantastic (a suggestion that Alejandro will also make, as we will see a little later on in this discussion).

Martín Gaité's use of intertextuality signals that the possible alternatives of her own text are similar to James's allusions to *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *Jane Eyre*, thereby implicitly suggesting that the story of *The Turn of the Screw* lies somewhere in the middle between the marvellous tale of the former and the uncanny tale of the latter. Similarly, in *The Back Room* the allusion to both Cervantes and Carroll are significant in that they allow the text to signal to the reader the possibilities of the two realms adjacent to the fantastic, respectively the uncanny or the marvellous. Because *The Back Room* continuously oscillates

between these interpretations (just as *The Turn of the Screw* does), its sustained hesitation places it firmly within the realm of the pure fantastic. Furthermore, even Martín Gaité's allusions to Todorov and Kafka can be seen as opposing alternatives, as Kafka's work, as I have pointed out above, puts an end to the history of the fantastic drawn by Todorov. Thus, like James in *The Turn of the Screw*, Martín Gaité intentionally uses specific literary allusions (Todorov and Kafka, Cervantes and Carroll) from within the canon of fantastic literature to situate her own novel as a pure fantastic text.

2.3 Shifting Planes: Between the Present and the Past

The second feature of the fantastic I want to discuss is the inevitable ontological instability that stems from having at least two intersecting ontological planes, the real world and the possibly magical world. I say at least two, but there are often even more ontological levels simultaneously at play within the text. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale describes postmodernist writings as having a "fantastic charge", a new type of hesitation generated between opposing ontological levels (83). For McHale, postmodern fiction foregrounds ontological concerns above epistemological ones; consequently it is the "ontological dominant" that determines the way in which we can better understand various postmodern features (10). Using McHale's arguments, I would like to look at the different ontological levels that exist within *The Back Room*.

In *The Back Room* there are, to begin with, the two inherent ontological levels to be found in all fantastic texts: the natural and the supernatural. The large cockroach that appears out of nowhere, Alejandro's mysterious presence, the text that seemingly writes

itself, are all examples of the supernatural world possibly intruding upon the “real” world. Beyond that, however, there is another level of reality, the existence of which is only accessible to the narrator. This third ontological plane is the world of the narrator’s past. While memory and narration of past events always exist in narratives, be they realistic or not (and insofar as they belong to the mental world of the character, they would appear to pertain to what McHale might call the epistemological concerns of the text), in *The Back Room* elements from the past literally and materially intrude upon the world of the present. Unlike a simple retelling of the past, in *The Back Room* the past comes alive and comes to occupy an actual space in the present world of the narrative. As I mentioned earlier, at the beginning of the book, as the narrator is rummaging through her things, she comes across the letter from an ex-lover that is “glowing with a strange phosphorescence” (13). The narrator unfolds the letter, which turns out to be so large that it takes up the “entire width of the passageway” (13). As she reads, she begins to see the man as if she were standing there on the shore of the beach with him:

Then he gets up and begins to stroll idly down the deserted beach, allowing himself to get his feet wet. He notices that there are many fragments of broken dolls, arms, heads, trunks, legs, lying strewn about on the beach [...] He goes on walking, he disappears in the distance with his shoes in his hand. [...] I am sorry to see him wandering off in the distance before I manage to make out exactly what he looks like. (14-15)

The character described in the strangely large letter suddenly comes into existence and the reader finds his or herself in the world of the past as it intrudes upon the present. The clichéd idea that “the past comes to life” takes on a literal meaning throughout the narrative of *The Back Room*; this also happens during the course of her discussion with Alejandro.

When Alejandro first arrives, the narrator goes to get him a drink from the kitchen; there she sees a vision of herself as a young woman of eighteen, “come back to life from the depths of the mirror” (69). The narrator then proceeds to have an actual conversation with the apparition:

She has appeared to me at other times, when I least expected it, like a wise and providential ghost, in twenty-four years she has never tired of keeping watch over me [...] and she always emerges from the same place, from that imposing dining room, from the mirror that hung over the fireplace. I usually put her mind at rest and we end up laughing together. (69)

The interaction between the narrator and this younger version of herself is told in such a way that its ontological status remains in question. For one thing, the text does not in any way indicate that this event can be read exclusively either as an uncanny event (i.e., the narrator is in fact just talking to herself), or as a marvellous event (i.e., an actual ghost of herself having appeared to talk to her). I shall return to this in later chapters; for the moment it suffices to say that in the twentieth century the fantastic evolves beyond the two alternative narrative explanations, only one of which can be true (but we do not know which, hence the hesitation), to a narrative in which multiple alternative explanations can all be potentially true at the same time. Thus, although the modern fantastic remains true to Todorov’s condition of the sustained hesitation of the reader, it also goes beyond it—in wavering between multiple alternatives, the reader of the modern fantastic experiences a more pronounced hesitation than in the traditional fantastic.

2.4 The Hesitation of the Pure Fantastic

The third and final feature of the fantastic that I want to discuss in relation to *The Back Room* is the hesitation generated in both the character and the reader and that is sustained from beginning to end. As we have seen, Todorov's book makes an appearance in the story, and as the narrator says that she intends to write a fantastic novel, the fact that *The Back Room* follows Todorov's definition of the fantastic is no surprise. What has yet to be explored is how the novel manages to maintain the hesitation between the two possible classic interpretations, the uncanny or the marvellous, and develop it further by going beyond this, explicitly pointing to its status as a fantastic text. To address this question, I will begin by exploring the specific elements in the text that promote the overall dream-like quality of the whole story.

As in *The Turn of the Screw*, in *The Back Room* too, the reader suspects that the first-person narrator may be unreliable. In fact, unlike the Governess in Henry James's novella, the narrator of *The Back Room* points to her potential unreliability when she admits to forgetting things, to not hearing well, to misplacing things, and, like her cluttered apartment filled with scraps and mementos from the past, her mind too seems to be filled with un-ordered fragments from the past. Her recollections are spurred on by memories of popular songs, magazines, and movies. In one instance for example, she comes across the cover of a folder in which she has written the words,

FANTOMES DU PASSÉ. Among the clippings I see a photo of Conchita Piquer [a famous singer] [...] The same thing happens whenever I open a drawer. Something different from what I was hunting for turns up, [...] This time it's an article of mine, published in *Triunfo*, one on postwar songs. It may help give me ideas for the book when I get seriously to work on it.¹³ (115-116)

¹³ Carmen Martín Gaité did indeed publish an article on postwar songs in the journal *Triunfo*. See "Cuarto A Espadas Sobre Las Coplas De Postguerra," *Triunfo* 529 (18.11.1972) 36-39. The actual existence of this article further adds to the conflation of ontological levels that exist in the text.

Our ability as readers to trust that everything that seemingly occurs during the course of the story does indeed occur is constantly thwarted by the narrator's obvious disorientation and confusion. As the narrator herself states, "I've been having lapses of memory a lot lately" (24). Thus, when Alejandro appears and she cannot even remember having scheduled the meeting, we begin to wonder whether this sinister figure is who he says he is, or whether the narrator is even more confused than she appeared initially.

The unreliability of the narrator, however, is not presented as a hindrance to good storytelling or to writing powerful fiction. In one particular instance, for example, Alejandro points out that "Literature is a defiance of logic [...] not a refuge against uncertainty" (50). In fact, much of their conversation is about the different ways one can write about one's personal history. The narrator expresses her frustration at being unable to form a narrative out of all the historical research she has been accumulating over the years. Alejandro, on the other hand, is constantly urging her to dispense with any strict adherence to the "facts" and to write a novel similar in nature to dreams. As the narrator thinks to herself, "Possibly he considers my later historical research as an even more serious betrayal of ambiguity. When I began it, I was aware that I was going astray, deserting dreams in order to come to a compromise with history, forcing myself to put things in order, to understand them one by one, out of fear of being shipwrecked" (50). In *The Back Room*, the chaos of the apartment, the jumbled up memories in the narrator's mind, the bits and pieces of songs, poems, and literature, all provide "unreliable" sources that inform her version of history. It is her very unreliability as a narrator that helps imbue the story with the dream-like quality Alejandro finds so much more "real" than actual dates and meticulous research.

The ambiguity of the text also stems from the inconclusiveness of the novel. Despite the sustained hesitation and ambiguity throughout the story, *The Back Room* cannot be defined as an open-ended novel, because it does indeed come to a neat close, with the narrator finding the actual text of *The Back Room* typed to completion. Everything else, however, remains inconclusive, in that the reader is never given any evidence to suggest how much of what is described as having taken place is true, is a dream, or is a fabrication of the narrator's mind—or indeed, how the novel came to be written. Unlike *The Turn of the Screw*, whose definition as a fantastic text stems from our not knowing how to read it, *The Back Room* explicitly identifies itself as a fantastic text—a self-definition that could disrupt the very effect of the fantastic that it asserts. By the end, however, the reader is left both with a sense that despite all the uncertainty, a version of history (albeit a highly personalized and fantastic one), has somehow mysteriously been written and imparted; and, at the same time, with the uncertainty of how it all came about, but also of what we are to make of the simultaneous evoking and defiance of the “rules” and history of Todorov's definition of the fantastic.

The three aspects we have been exploring—the literary allusions, ontological instability, and the hesitation—all serve to illustrate how *The Back Room*, as a modern example of the pure fantastic, incorporates different strategies to generate hesitation and explore alternative fictive and historical possibilities. What adds to the complexity of this particular text is its metafictional self-identification as a fantastic text, while also attempting to go beyond that identification by continuing to generate hesitation from other sources such as ontological instability. In this modern fantastic text, the main source of the hesitation shifts from just the wavering between two possible alternatives and is divided

equally between shifting ontological planes (the past and the present) and the two possible uncanny/or marvellous interpretations.

2.5 Telling Stories: Metafiction and the Modern Fantastic

Until now my discussion has been focused on the way in which *The Back Room*, as an example of the modern fantastic, forms itself within the boundaries of Todorov's definition of the classic fantastic while introducing new aspects that both enhance and defy it. In this section I want to consider the way in which *The Back Room* can also be considered as a postmodern text, particularly in the way it foregrounds its metafictional nature. What I hope to illustrate is how the (post)modern fantastic incorporates metafiction to explore its own unique method of construction as a work of fiction that aims to present alternative ways of representing personal history.

In her book *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as a "term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). Also often defined, in a simple formula, as fiction about fiction, metafiction raises a host of questions about concepts that we thought we could take for granted, such as "perception", "reality", and "fiction". A truly metafictional text (as *The Back Room* certainly is) will leave the reader questioning to what extent all reality is fiction, and all fiction is a version of reality.

Waugh's use of the expression "self-consciously" indicates the metafictional text's awareness and promotion of itself as an openly constructed work built upon the ongoing

relationship between fiction and reality within the confines of language. There are two main ways in which *The Back Room* in particular reveals its metafictional nature. The first is its specific and intentional intertextuality, as has been discussed above; the second is the way in which the narrative is always *literally* and *explicitly* talking about all the elements that go into its own creation. During the course of their night-long discussion, the narrator and Alejandro discuss everything, from the nature of the fantastic to how to write a fantastic story about growing up in Spain during the Franco era. After all that, the book is magically written in its entirety by the end of the night, and it is titled *The Back Room*, like the one we hold in our hands. More generally however, the mode of the fantastic in *The Back Room* illustrates that alternative realities/versions of history and metafiction go together. To illustrate these points I will look at specific examples from the text.

Earlier in this chapter I examined the most prominent literary allusions found in *The Back Room*. The allusions to Kafka, Cervantes, Carroll, and Todorov point both to the inspirations and building blocks that participate in *The Back Room's* creation, and to its (self)-identification as a fantastic text. The book's overt intertextuality is allied to its metafictionality: *The Back Room's* overt references to other fantastic literature (or literature about the fantastic, as in the case of Todorov) encourages the reader to read this book in relation to those, and thus makes the reader participate in its metafictional discussion about writing fantastic fiction, history, and memory. The text also self-consciously points to the theoretical and practical building blocks of its own construction by raising questions about what constitutes the fantastic. What purpose does the fantastic text serve? How does one write a fantastic text? Alejandro first introduces the subject of the fantastic when discussing an earlier work of the narrator/author called *The Spa*, which, he argues, would have been a

better work of fiction had it been written in the mode of the fantastic: “Ambiguity is the key to fantastic literature [...] Not knowing whether what one has seen is true or false, never finding out. You should have dared to walk along that tightrope till the end of the story”

(47). According to Alejandro, *The Spa* begins somewhat mysteriously:

“What is most successful is the feeling of strangeness. You arrive with your companion, you stand together next to the railing of that bridge looking at the green water with the mill in the distance. The germ of the fantastic is already contained in that passage, and during the entire first part you manage to maintain that atmosphere. One doesn’t know whether that man who is with you exists or not, whether he knows you well or not. That is what is really essential, daring to face up to uncertainty. And the reader feels that he can neither believe nor fail to believe what is going to happen from then on. That is the basis of fantastic literature. It’s a question of rejecting everything there in that hotel that subsequently seems perversely bent on appearing to you to be altogether normal and obvious”. (44)

I include this whole passage for several reasons. To begin with, it illustrates with great detail what the fantastic should be: “daring to face up to uncertainty” by sustaining that uncertainty or hesitation throughout the story. It also shows that the fantastic is an *active* rejection of everything that seems “real” or “normal” in favour of uncertainty. Secondly, the passage self-reflexively points the reader back to the similarities of this novel to Martín Gaité’s previous work (*The Spa*, or *El Balneario*, is Martín Gaité’s first novella (1954), which also moves between descriptions of the real world and the unconscious of the protagonist, or dreamlike, even nightmarish situations). As in *The Spa*, in *The Back Room* too “One doesn’t know whether that man who is with you exists or not, whether he knows you well or not”—we are never able to determine whether Alejandro actually exists or is a figment of the narrator’s imagination; and if he does exist, how does he know the narrator? Alejandro seems to know quite a great deal about her, and yet she cannot remember him (her memory

is admittedly faulty, but how does one forget so utterly someone who seems to have been so central to her life?). Then there is the mysterious phone call the narrator receives, where the female caller insinuates that Alejandro might be an ex-lover of the narrator's. However, to the very end of the novel, Alejandro's identity and existence are never determined. The narrator falls asleep and awakens to find him gone. Meanwhile, Alejandro continues his argument on *The Spa* stating, "The second part, the one that begins with the awakening and continues with the realistic description of the spa, spoils everything. It is the fruit of fear. You strayed from the path of dreams" (50). It is obvious from this discussion of *The Spa* that according to Alejandro the narrator betrays the fantastical beginning, relinquishing it for a more a realistic tone. For as Alejandro argues, "'Yes, it could have been a good fantastic novel,' he says slowly. 'It had a very promising beginning, but then you allowed fear to overcome you, a fear you've never lost. What happened to you?'" (42). *The Back Room* can thus be seen as the corrective text to the narrator's earlier "betrayal" of the fantastic in *The Spa*.

Through its own metafictional reflection, *The Back Room* is laying the theoretical foundations of its construction. By having Alejandro point out that the existence of the companion in *The Spa* is called into question by the reader shows how self-consciously the novel draws the attention of the reader to itself. We deduce that the fantastic is presented as both a challenge and a source of fear for the writer. To write in the mode of the fantastic, the writer must give up any strict adherence to the laws and certainties of the "real" world. The mode of the fantastic is composed of a symbiotic relationship between the real and the unreal, it is the "real" world, but one that is intruded upon by the unreal. Writers must give themselves up to the "uncertainty" that comes with the fantastic, and yet, at what cost? On

the other hand, what can a writer gain from the mode of the fantastic? These are some of the main questions that stem from the theoretical foundations set by Alejandro's formulation of the fantastic and which the book attempts to answer during the course of their discussion.

Further on in the story, when the narrator discovers Cervantes's magical incantation typed on her typewriter, Alejandro insists that such occurrences can be considered completely normal if only we changed the way in which we view the world. As he explains: "strange things happen all the time. Our mistake lies in the fact that we insist on applying the law of gravity to them, or the law of clock-time, or some other law that we obey unquestioningly. It is difficult for us to admit that such things have their own law" (99). The fantastic then is presented as a mode of writing that is conducive to depicting a more inclusive version of "reality", for, as Alejandro argues, "There's nothing that chance doesn't turn topsy-turvy" (100). One of the possible fears that a writer might have when dealing with the fantastic, and which the narrator in *The Back Room* often expresses, is of losing oneself by disconnecting from anything concrete and certain. At one point the narrator describes the futility of trying to put into writing a dream or a thought that seems important: "As soon as I see my handwriting, the things it refers to turn into dried-up butterflies that just a while before were flitting about in the sunlight [...] but the minute I start looking around for a pencil it's gone. Nothing coincides or holds together, the thread that the beads of the necklace were strung on has broken" (120). For the narrator, the difficulty she faces in writing about her childhood is to find a way of "stringing" (127), or rather as Alejandro suggests, "unstringing" (127) her memories to create a narrative that is still true to what actually happened, but which gathers together all the various elements

from her memory and to present them in an alternative way to the expected narrative coherence. The problem, then, lies not in what to write, but in how to write it. Moreover, how can one present the backroom of memory, and yet still express something that can be true and relevant to the history of Spain during that particular era? King argues that in his deliberate appropriation and re-coding of historical figures of Spain's pre-Republican past, Franco "not only reinterpreted and controlled the present, but he also reinterpreted and controlled individual's perception of themselves. Francoist propaganda asked that Spaniards move away from seeing themselves as actors or agents in history to servants of the all-controlling, God-ordained state" (35). The author/narrator of *The Back Room* herself admits that even as a child she doubted the "exemplary conduct" of the saints, the "prideful attitude" of kings, conquistadors, and heroes that disturbed her (92). She rebelled against those impositions and doubted them because they were presented as fulfilling the role for Spain that Franco's propaganda promoted. Rather than adhere to the state's valorizing of such historical figures, particularly Queen Isabelle (who was held up as the model for the ideal Spanish woman¹⁴), the author/narrator learns to, as King puts it, "valorize instead the more fluid or open markers of the past" (36). From the very start, as a young woman, the narrator/Martín Gaité mistrusted those who wrote the official version of history ("I didn't believe a word of what was recounted in the history books or the newspapers. Those who believed such things were to blame for what happened" (49)); as she gets older—and as a woman subjected to the strict moral education imposed by the state that restricted women to a domestic role within society—her mistrust of these historical figures solidifies into a personal rebellion of her state-assigned role as mother and wife and she refuses to get

¹⁴As the narrator explains, "we were placed beneath her [Queen Isabelle] advocacy, we were given talks about her iron will and spirit of sacrifice, we were told how she had held the ambition and the despotism of the nobles in check, how she had created the Holy Office, expelled the traitorous Jews, given up her jewels to finance the most glorious undertaking in our history" (90-91).

married (92). It is for this reason that Martín Gaité deliberately chooses to write about her past in the mode of the fantastic, because it allows her to explore those seemingly less important markers such as the backroom of her childhood home, the imaginary island of Bergai she creates with her best friend as form of escape from the hardships, and her mother's encouragement of her education versus the rigid historical figures of Queen Isabelle, Franco, and figures of the Catholic church that were held up as models of virtue and imposed by the state's extensive propaganda.

Thus, when the author/narrator first begins to write this novel she goes through vast amounts of historical research (138), but eventually comes to the realization that the secret to writing a personal account of the past lies not in following a chronological and methodological approach that would result in just another "realistic" description of what went on during that time, but in writing about the lives lived within these historical events. As the narrator thinks, "The thing that's most exciting is contradictory versions. They're the very basis of literature. We are not just one being, but many, exactly as real history is not what is written by putting dates in their proper order and then presenting it to us as a single whole" (170). She compares the latter approach to following "the white pebbles", or adhering to concrete events and reality: "I spent several months going to the periodicals library to consult newspapers and magazines, and then I realized that that wasn't how to go about it, that what I was trying to recapture was something far more difficult to grasp. What I was after were the crumbs, not the little white pebbles" (138). Again, this is another example of the novel's pervasive intertextuality as it alludes to the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel who use crumbs to create a trail to find their way back home from the forest, but the trail is lost when the birds eat the crumbs. The crumbs represent a less permanent marker

as opposed to the solidity and permanency of pebbles. What is thus being metafictionally explored are two different ways of writing, mimetic or historical writing versus non-mimetic (such as the fantastic), and, more specifically, the rigid limits of the former in comparison to the freeing flexibility of the latter that allows the writer more agency over her own storytelling. King also remarks on the use of the “white pebbles” that can lead oneself back to the past and argues that “a better way may be to allow oneself to become disoriented, to lose that straight, static line into the past which the pebbles delineate. By relying on the less solid and stable breadcrumbs instead, the seeker in the forest becomes responsible herself for the reconstruction of the path/past—and thus also for the telling of that story” (45).

This brings us to the final yet founding concern in *The Back Room*: finding a way to present an alternative yet equally valid version of history. The central metaphor of the story in relation to which the concept of history is explored is that of the “backroom”, literally a storage room that existed in the narrator’s childhood home. The backroom lay at the back of the house and it was at first a room in which the children could play, daydream, and create imaginary worlds. The narrator explicitly (and, again, metafictionally) extends the reality of the backroom to a metaphor:

as the attic of one’s brain, a sort of secret place full of a vague jumble of all sorts of miscellaneous junk, separated from the cleaner and more orderly anterooms of the mind by a curtain that is only occasionally pulled back. The memories that may come to us as something of a surprise live in hiding in the back room. They also emerge from there, and only when they want to. It’s no use trying to flush them out. (87)

Once the Second World War starts, however, the space slowly becomes invaded by more “functional” things, such as dried foods, and other objects in need of storage. The backroom, symbolic of childhood innocence, imagination, and memory, is also symbolic of

the inner recesses of one's mind where all these things dwell, pushed further and further back as one grows older. Like the backroom that soon becomes more of a functional storage space than a free creative space, the mind of the individual creates its own backroom in which it stores memories of the past. The creative potential of the backroom is thus sacrificed for the more functional concerns of "reality" and the demanding concerns of the present. We soon find that the backroom also becomes a metaphor for the fantastic. For, as we have seen earlier, the narrator's creativity and desire to write a fantastic text is forgotten in her quest to acquire the seemingly more "functional" components of her narrative, that is, all the meticulous research of archives dedicated to that era in Spanish history. It is only when she returns to the backroom of her memory and lets its jumbled, stored materials re-emerge out of it in her conversation with Alejandro that she is able to actually write her personal account of growing up in Spain during the Franco era, in a text that uses the mode of the fantastic. Like the darkened interior spaces we find in the Gothic, the backroom thus becomes a metaphor for the subconscious long repressed by the decades of Franco's political and social tyranny. It is only after his death, and through the evolution of the fantastic in which the repressed is literalized and brought to the surface of the text, that memory, experience, and recovery can be exercised in the light of writing.

One of the central topics illustrating the dichotomy between personal history and a more ideological History propagated by the repressive political and cultural forces during Franco's time, is that which concerns the destiny of Spanish women, where women were essentially taught to behave and to conform to a constructed "ideal" woman—namely, Queen Isabelle, the fifteenth-century leader of the Catholic *Reconquista*. As the narrator explains, "Queen Isabelle never gave herself a moment's respite, never doubted. Proud of

her legacy, we would fulfill our mission as Spanish women” (91). The role of popular culture is set in contrast to the stern image of the queen: “That summer I read a lot of romantic novels. The role that romantic novels played in shaping the sensibilities of young girls growing up in the forties is very important. And songs, the part songs played in our lives seems fundamental too” (138-139). Carmen de Icaza, the writer of romance novels, “was the idol of the postwar era, introducing ‘moderate modernity’ into the genre. The heroine might not be all that young, she might even have grey hair. She was courageous and hard-working. She had liberated herself economically, but bore the burden of a secret, tormented past” (141-142). The narrator thus incorporates the different types of popular female figures (the “ideal” image of Queen Isabelle, the popular singer Conchita Piquer, and the “moderately modern” writer Carmen de Icaza) that influenced her as a young woman growing up.

As a young ambitious woman, the narrator talks of her rebellion against such an oppressive pre-ordained future: “As a consequence of the brainwashing of that mawkish and optimistic propaganda of the forties, my mistrust of resolute and self-assured individuals became more marked than ever, my eagerness for freedom grew, and the alliance with disorder that I had secretly signed in the apartment of the fourth floor of No. 14 Calle Mayor turned into a near-unbreakable pact” (92). What is of most significance in these words is how the narrator perceives the evils of “certainty” (Queen Isabelle never suffers a moment’s doubt) resulting in a life conformed to rigid notions of a woman’s proper role versus freedom and disorder (which itself begets uncertainty). This discussion parallels the narrator’s earlier discussion with Alejandro about the fantastic and “daring to face up to uncertainty”. The narrator, very early on in her life, makes the conscious decision to reject

the “certainties” of a domesticated married life with children for the freedom of becoming a writer. The mode of the fantastic in *The Back Room* is thus a fictive reflection of the narrator’s earlier decision to seek an alternative reality or destiny for herself. Further on in their discussion, Alejandro questions the “certainty” of her vision when the narrator admits that sometimes the shadowy forms of her own mind are more real to her than what she sees clearly with open eyes: “what good are those laws that appear to govern the order of time so indisputably? There’s nothing that chance doesn’t turn topsy-turvy” (100).

Alejandro’s words lead her to think of Queen Isabelle once again and the “deceptive version of her conduct put before us in those textbooks and those speeches, where no room was left for chance, where each step, journey, or decision of the queen appeared to bear the mark of a superior and inevitable destiny” (100). Again, this discussion, in which words such as “laws”, “govern”, “time”, “destiny” and “deception” are pitted against words such as “chance” and “topsy-turvy” is another covert way in which the novel is metafictionally exploring the two potential realities (the “real” world of laws and time and the topsy-turvy world of the “unreal”) that struggle against each other within the framework of the fantastic—and which thus lend significant political force to the mode of the fantastic. For the narrator, this is her challenge as a writer, to somehow find a way to reconcile “the march of history and the rhythm of dreams” (100). As she thinks to herself, “It is such a vast panorama and such a topsy-turvy one, like a room where each thing is in its proper place precisely because it is out of place. All this goes back to my initial perplexities in the face of the concept of history, there in the back room, surrounded by toys and books strewn all over the floor” (101). Thus, *The Back Room* self-reflexively explores the ways in which as a fantastic novel it can encompass the paradoxes of a woman’s struggle between accepting a pre-ordained destiny, a propagated ideal (both of which are “versions” of a constructed

reality) or creating her own destiny, and her own version of reality and history as she experienced it. Choosing to write in the mode of the fantastic allows the narrator to explore the political, artistic, and personal choices she makes both as a woman and as a writer seeking alternative ways of presenting her version of history. By incorporating the techniques of metafiction, *The Back Room* as a fantastic text is also able to reveal the “constructedness” of both these types of realities—the ideal of Queen Isabelle and the political propaganda stemming from Franco’s regime versus the narrator’s own fantastical retelling of her experiences of that era. Within the mode of the fantastic, both “realities” are levelled and revealed to be mere human constructs, and not indisputable certainties to which one must necessarily conform. Thus, the fantastic, like metafiction, calls into question the validity of any one absolute idea of reality or version of history. Furthermore, when they are combined as they are in *The Back Room*, they form a type of (post)modernist literature that effectively deconstructs the given “certainties” of the real world, and consequently opens it up to a host of alternative representations. As the narrator states, “My image shatters and is refracted in infinite reflections” (170). As Castilla argues, “it is through language [...] that the narrator sets up a series of apparent polarities that define the field of conflicting forces within the novel—memory and forgetfulness, history and literature, true and false, reality and fantasy—polarities that, in a post-Franco compensatory adjustment for a half-century of literary deprivation, are suddenly, ambiguously, flung together in a celebration of riches” (822).

If fantastic literature, like many other types of literature, is always inevitably examining the relationship between fiction and reality, then it is inevitable that the fantastic should evolve and adapt to an ever-changing reality. In the twentieth century, after Freud

and the continuing development of psychoanalysis, after two world wars, and the continuing spread of capitalism and increasing globalization, it is only natural that, like many other artistic mediums and modes of literature, the fantastic should change in nature to remain relevant within a greatly altered world. In the next three chapters, I will explore how a slightly modified version of Todorov's definition can allow us to examine magical realist works in this new light, as adapting and continuing the work of the fantastic, including its concern with the sublime and its incorporation of elements of the Gothic, in a variety of international works.

Chapter Three

The Evolution of the Fantastic:

Magical Realism and *The House of the Spirits*

"Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the 'lack of reality' of reality, together with the invention of other realities" – Jean-François

Lyotard.

In chapter one I explored the Gothic origins of the fantastic and the pure fantastic of the nineteenth century, as defined by Todorov's seminal study. However, as we have seen in chapter two, in the twentieth century, the radical new developments in psychology and technology, and the changes in a society characterized by increasing globalization and urbanization, have led inevitably to equally radical changes in the literary sphere, the fantastic included. As we saw, the first major change in the nature of the fantastic can be found in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. For Todorov, Kafka's cockroach signals the end of the fantastic, stripped of its hesitation by the banality of Kafka's tone in announcing Gregor's transformation. I have argued, however, that rather than ending the fantastic, Kafka's novella marked its transformation by merging the (previously separate and alternative) world of the unreal with the real. Key to this transformation is the technique of the literalization of the fantastic element, or what Stanley Corngold in "The Structure of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*" terms the "literalization of metaphor" (5): a technique exemplified in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* when the isolated and dehumanized Gregor literally transforms into a vermin (the significance of which I will explore more in this chapter). Presenting these fantastic literalized metaphors in a banal, ordinary, everyday reality is one of the techniques that magical realism will take up, from the middle of the century, in Latin America and as it develops and becomes an international literary phenomenon. Magical realism, as we saw in the introduction, resembles the fantastic in many ways, yet it does not conform to all of Todorov's three categories. Following from the previous chapter on *The Back Room* as an example of a postmodern fantastic text, and from the way Martín Gaité's novel explicitly looks back to the history of the fantastic to place it in a specific historical moment of dictatorship and in relation to the experience of living under political and social repression,

this chapter will consider how a magical realist novel such as Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* too includes within itself a literary historical past.

3.1 Coming to the Surface: The Literalization of Metaphor

In the previous chapter, I discussed how in the early twentieth century new scientific theories such as Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and Neils Bohr's Principle of Complementarity introduced the notion of discontinuity and randomness in physical reality, and therefore made the hesitation between possible alternative explanations constitutive of physical reality itself, and how metafictional tropes help undo the illusion of a coherent whole to reveal the uncertainties behind attempts to present just one representation of what constitutes "reality" or "History".

Having accepted that uncertainty and ambiguity are now the norm, I would argue that the fantastic evolves and adopts this in its very structure by adopting the technique of the literalization of metaphor. Stanley Corngold argues that "Kafka's 'taking over' images from ordinary speech enacts a second metaphorization (*metaphero* = 'to carry over')—one that concludes in the literalization and hence the metamorphosis of the metaphor" (5). In *The Metamorphosis* the isolation of the protagonist Gregor Samsa—alienated in a dehumanized and dehumanizing society, trapped in the drudgery of a job in which he receives no respect by having to provide for his family—is objectified through his actual transformation into a vermin, a literalization of his metaphorical existence as a social vermin.

As I also suggested in chapter one, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* can be seen to be another manifestation of the fantastic that, in its invention of a life that defies its temporal

and gender boundaries, literalizes the novel's exploration of the effects for individual identities that the collapse of the rigid social and moral structures of the Victorian era had brought about, and the new concepts of temporality that philosophers such as Bergson were proposing. These literalizations might have seemed—as they did to Todorov—to signal the end of the fantastic, as there was no longer any hesitation: both the real and what at another time we may have considered to be the supernatural were now present in the text, sharing the same level of reality. This is different from the intervention of divine action in a context where belief dominates, or even from a witch's enchantment: no-one really believes that men can be from one day to the next be transformed into giant cockroaches or that individuals can change sex and live for several centuries, yet we accept, in those novels, the co-existence of the everyday real with the fantastic event. Works like *The Back Room* and *The House of the Spirits*, however, show us that this is just a continuation and transformation of the fantastic, which adapts to the new understanding of reality that I have described. The fantastic can thus continue, *as a part of reality*; the secrets and mysteries it represents are now historical repressions—the decades of dictatorship of Franco's Spain and Pinochet's Chile in *The House of the Spirits*, for example, with the crimes those regimes perpetrated as they gained power and while in power, and which are either denied or passed off, by these regimes, as acts of patriotism and defence of the nation, of morality, and of a solid social structure, but which are denounced as crimes by its opponents and victims. Thus the hesitation is no longer between natural and supernatural but between versions of a documented history (historiography also having become a key focus for intellectual and political debate in the latter part of the twentieth century), and the fantastic is enlisted in the operation of trying to account for and bring into the open a historical past that still haunts the present. Where in the traditional fantastic the supernatural is used as a

metaphor for underlying currents of darkness, terror, or sexual repression, now in magical realism the supernatural takes on the actual shape of that which it once alluded to, and simultaneously allows it to co-exist alongside the “real”.

This over-arching concept of the literalization of metaphor, in the sense and with the associations expounded above, can help us examine how and why Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* reincorporates Gothic themes such as those of the crumbling estate and of spirits and brings them to the surface of the text, and how it deals with the theme of the silence of the sublime discussed in chapter one.

Before we move onto the analysis of the text, a brief summary will help make sense of the book’s multitude of characters and events. *The House of the Spirits* centres on the story of the marriage of Esteban Trueba and Clara Del Valle, their daughter Blanca and twin sons Jaime and Nicholas, and Blanca’s daughter Alba, who is also the narrator of the story. Many secondary characters also play significant roles: Ferula, Esteban’s spinster sister; Pedro Tercero, a revolutionary peasant in the Truebas’ estate of Tres Marías with whom Blanca has a life-long affair despite her father’s disapproval; Miguel, another young revolutionary and Alba’s lover; Esteban García, Esteban Trueba’s illegitimate grandson and the result of one of the latter’s many rapes of the peasant girls on Tres Marías; and the Count Jean de Satigny, whom Esteban forces Blanca to marry after discovering her affair with Pedro. Blanca, already pregnant with Pedro’s child when she marries Satigny, gives birth to Alba, having left the count soon after the marriage. The novel follows the political and financial ascension of Esteban Trueba from a well-born but poor and ambitious young man who falls head over heels in love with the ethereally beautiful Rosa, the daughter of wealthy parents (and Clara’s older sister). His love for Rosa and their betrothal drives him to work day and night in the

remote gold mines of Chile to become worthy of her. When Rosa is accidentally killed by poison meant for her politically liberal father, Esteban is almost undone by his grief, and decides to abandon the gold mines to resurrect his family's decaying ancestral estate, Tres Marías. After years of hard work, Esteban has managed to make Tres Marías one of the most prosperous haciendas in the country and returns to Rosa's family to ask for the hand of any remaining single daughter. Clara, endowed with clairvoyant powers and a close affinity with the spiritual world, accepts Esteban's proposal; they marry. Esteban's bitter older spinster sister Ferula comes to live with them, gradually falls in love with Clara, and dedicates her life to taking care of her and Esteban's children. Her excessive and somewhat inappropriate love for Clara soon results in a fight with the jealous Esteban, and she is banished from their home. Pedro Tercero, the son of the head foreman at Tres Marías and Blanca's lover, also gets banished from Tres Marías when Esteban discovers that he spreads revolutionary liberal ideas through pamphlets and songs based on fables that he composes himself. Many years later, Pedro becomes one of the nation's most famous revolutionary musicians and is still in love with Blanca. Without ever explicitly mentioning them, the novel covers the events of the newly elected Socialist President Salvador Guillermo Allende, his assassination in 1973 by the military led by General Augusto Pinochet, and the latter's subsequent refusal to relinquish power to civilian rule, allowing the military junta to rule till 1990. The novel also indirectly references other events in Chilean history, such as the great earthquake of 1939 (the worst earthquake in recorded history at the time), the agrarian land reforms that Allende instigated, the death of the great poet Pablo Neruda (who is referred to simply as "the Poet"), and the persecution by the military junta and disappearance of thousands of political dissenters, the *desaparecidos*.

3.2 The Ghosts of the Past: Gothic Themes

The House of the Spirits employs, as its title already suggests, a variety of Gothic themes, amongst which two significant ones are the Gothic space (i.e. the ancestral estate or castle) and the “spirits of the past” that haunt the present. In *The House* the Gothic theme of the declining ancestral home is recuperated for political purposes and is divided into two symbolic estates: Tres Marías (the country estate and source of the family’s wealth) and “the big house on the corner” (the city estate where Esteban’s political ascent is based, but which then falls into decline). The theme of “the spirits of the past” manifests itself on two levels: textually, the book is haunted by its Gothic and fantastic origins; on the narrative level, the very real spirits are literalized metaphors for a past that continues to haunt the present. Let us take a closer look at how these two major Gothic themes manifest themselves in the text, and to what purpose.

When Esteban first arrives in Tres Marías, he finds the estate in semi-ruin, and its peasants living in abject poverty, illness, and ignorance. The vivid description of the estate conveys the same sense of decay so often found in Gothic texts:

After a moment he was able to make out the main house, which was still standing, although it looked like something from a nightmare, full of rubble, with chicken wire and garbage strewn across the floor. Half the tiles were broken, and a wild tangle of vines had grown through the windows and covered most of the outside wall. (65)

Even the sign with the name of the property is broken, and “the wind knocked it against the post with a muffled sound that made it echo like a funeral drum” (64). Upon entering the main house he finds that “it smelled like a tomb” (66). The emphasis on neglect, decaying

and death is reminiscent of the descriptions of the house of Usher and the locations of other Gothic tales, as is Tres Marías's description as a very remote estate, almost completely cut-off from the outside world (similar to Bly in *The Turn of the Screw*). Like the house of Usher's effect on its inhabitants, Tres Marías too soon starts to affect Esteban: "I gradually became a savage. I began to forget words, my vocabulary grew smaller, and I became very demanding. Since I had no need to keep up appearances, the bad character I've always had only got worse" (71). However, in Allende's novel this typical Gothic theme is reversed, and Tres Marías soon becomes a very prosperous estate, due in large part to Esteban's incredible will and seemingly boundless energy and vitality (which, it must also be noted, is in great contrast to the frail and weak figure of Usher). However—and unlike "The Fall of the House of Usher", in which the estate falls into further decline to the point that it finally crashes in upon itself (and its owner), or *The Castle of Otranto* in which the castle is freed from the tyranny of Manfred and returned to its rightful owner—the theme of the estate in this magical realist setting is subject to both positive and negative changes through which it manages to survive and even prosper, but can again decline.

Unlike the inherited Tres Marías, the other major estate belonging to Esteban Trueba, known only as "the big house on the corner", is a new and extravagantly decorated mansion that Esteban erects when he marries Clara:

He hired a French architect and had part of the building materials imported from abroad, so that he would be the only house with German stained-glass windows, mouldings carved in Austria, faucets of English bronze, Italian marble floors and special locks ordered by catalogue from the United States. (114)

It becomes evident that although Esteban manages to include furniture from every western European country for his house, he contemplates only including a few statues from his native country: “and perhaps one or two courageous Indians from the history of the Americas, naked and crowned with feathers, his one concession to patriotism” (115). The house is a stranger to its country, borrowing from its native traditions as it does from the styles of Western Europe, in fact treating its history and culture as a condescending Western tourist might. This opulent western-style house is representative of Esteban’s class: conservative, allied more to Spanish and European culture than local Chilean culture. The house is in an upscale neighbourhood far removed from the slums of the poverty-stricken city, of which we are only given glimpses, mainly through the charity trips taken by various members of the family during the course of the story.

Unlike Tres Marías, the big house on the corner does not fare so well, and after Clara’s death it falls into a lasting decline: “Gone with her were the spirits and the guests, as well as that luminous gaiety that had always been present [...] Alba noticed the decline from the very first days” (338). In the ensuing years, we are told, “the house changed into a ruin” (338). While Tres Marías shows that Esteban’s potential for good is reflected in his ability to be productive and get things done, the big house on the corner is where Esteban permanently moves to once he goes into politics, leaving the peasants and the country life for power and life in the capital. During this time, Esteban inevitably neglects Tres Marías, so that it returns to its former state of gentle decline. Conversely, while living in the big house on the corner, his political power in the city and, in the ensuing years, in the whole nation is solidified and he becomes an iconic figure within the repressive Conservative government. It is interesting to note, however, that Esteban’s moral decline (reflected by his

increasingly repressive politics) after Clara's death coincides with the decline of the big house on the corner. All of this culminates in his most fatal political mistake when he helps bring down the democratically elected Socialist president and his government by conspiring in a military coup that marks not only the downfall of the country but also, against his expectations, his own, for once the military come into power his only remaining and greatly cherished granddaughter Alba is taken prisoner and tortured, and his son Jaime is executed soon after the death of the President. The big house on the corner thus lies at the symbolic centre of the family's general decline (which had begun with Clara's death), Esteban's consolidation into a figure of the repressive Conservative party, and the country's spiralling violence and the unleashing of mass terror instigated by the military regime.

Within the political dimension of the book, Tres Marías is thus symbolic of the continuing survival of the peasants and working class, their ability to endure years of tyranny and neglect at the hands of patrons like Esteban and those he stands for, and still survive. During the tragically short-lived Socialist government, Tres Marías is expropriated as part of a nation-wide land reform, and given to its peasants. Upon hearing the news, Esteban, in a fit of rage, arms himself and heads to Tres Marías to punish the peasants and to attempt to get back his land (406). The situation that ensues parallels the political situation at the time. When Esteban arrives he is quickly captured by the celebrating peasants and taken hostage, just as the Chilean people are finally able to democratically elect a Socialist President and regain power from the ruling Conservatives. It is only Pedro Tercero, the revolutionary singer and Blanca's now famous lover, who is able to convince the peasants to let the old man go (411-412). This whole episode parallels the polarized political atmosphere that existed in Chile during that time: on one side were the rich who used their substantial

wealth and power to sabotage the new socialist reforms being implemented by President Allende, and on the other were the poor and lower middle classes who hoped to have a more equal distribution of wealth and political influence.

There is also a third, smaller house that appears within the narrative for a short while but needs to be noted: Blanca's home during her brief marriage to Satigny. Since Blanca spends only a very brief period in the house, not much is said of it, but it too is symbolic of a third, almost forgotten group of people: the native Indian population, whose only appearance in the novel occurs during the brief section focused on this house, so that what happens there is very telling about the tragic fate of the native population of Chile.

Once Blanca is forcibly married off to the count, with a huge dowry presented by Esteban, they move into a rented old mansion. "The house was somewhat musty and abandoned, like everything in sight, and needed a number of repairs, but its former dignity and fin de siècle charms were intact" (286). This is another dusty and neglected estate, refurbished and brought to life (albeit a very strange life) by the count. From the very beginning, the house and its décor, its hostile servants, and Blanca's life with the count all seem a bit uncanny. Firstly, the marriage remains unconsummated, since neither the count nor Blanca has any interest in consummating it. Secondly, the count decorates the house with some of the strangest things: "Jean brought in suspicious Chinese porcelain vases that, instead of flowers, held dyed ostrich feathers, [...] and several incredible standing lamps held aloft by life-sized ceramic statues of half-naked Abyssinian Negroes wearing turban and slippers with upturned toes" (287). The servants are equally unconventional: "They were all outfitted with showy uniforms that looked like costumes from an operetta, [...] Blanca was uncomfortable in the house. She did not trust the expressionless Indians who waited on her

with such evident ill will and seemed to make fun of her behind her back” (287). Blanca suspects that the house hosts a terrible secret, a feeling intensified by the arrival of ancient Indian mummies that the count illegally exports to rich European collectors; Blanca believes that she hears them walking and whispering about the house at night. Emboldened by her mother’s advice that “there was no reason to fear the dead, only the living, because despite their bad reputation, there was no evidence that mummies had attacked anyone” (295), Blanca investigates, and eventually she uncovers her husband’s scandalous secret in his photography studio, filled with images of her husband’s pornographic perversions: “The walls of Jean de Satigny’s studio were covered with distressing erotic scenes that revealed her husband’s hidden character” (299). The narrator continues:

She recognized the faces of the household servants. There was the entire Incan court, as naked as God had put them on this earth, or barely clad in theatrical costumes. She saw the fathomless abyss between the thighs of the cook, the stuffed llama riding atop the lame servant girl, and the silent servant who waited on her at table, naked as a newborn babe, hairless and short legged, with his expressionless stone face and his disproportionate, erect penis. (299)

As this episode represents the Indians’ only major role in the novel, these passages showing them as victims of a European aristocrat’s humiliating perversions are important. The count not only illegally steals and sells what is essentially the native Indians’ history and heritage, but exploits them sexually as well, thus offering an allegory for his (and more generally, the European) theft and pillage of their heritage. Blanca, herself the daughter of a wealthy father and a descendent of the Spanish, is not too concerned with her husband’s exploitation of what is a part of Chile’s national heritage, but is so shocked by his sexually deviant tastes that she flees the house, never to see her husband again. She does not give the poor Indians another thought—and neither does the novel. After this brief episode, the

Indians, along with the strange house, all but disappear from a narrative that in every other aspect of its storytelling manages to revisit or mention episodes from the family's past. The novel's rather brief representation of the Indians can thus either be interpreted as a reflection on the Indians' status as an exploited and underprivileged minority, easily "forgotten" by their Spanish colonizers, or perhaps even as a reflection of Allende's own bias as a member of that ruling Spanish elite. They are, in a way, themselves ghosts that haunt this book in an ambiguous way.

Other, more explicit, ghosts appear in the novel, taking up another central Gothic theme. The actual spirits, as they are called here wander the corridors of the big house on the corner; but, at another, intertextual level, there are also the "spirits" of the past, remnants of this novel's relationship with the Gothic and fantastic tradition. We can then say that the spirits themselves are literalized metaphors for the way the Gothic past literally haunts this magical realist text. Throughout *The House of the Spirits*, Allende both overtly and covertly attempts to illustrate the way in which the present can never escape the past. The novel suggests this idea in the way actual objects from the past reappear at various times in the book. One such example is the hide of Barrabás Clara's childhood pet dog. Barrabás is the first word with which the novel begins: "Barrabás came to us by sea, the child Clara wrote in her delicate calligraphy" (11). Barrabás is killed by a knife on the day of Clara's engagement to Esteban (we are not told by whom), and in a misguided attempt to console Clara, Esteban has the dog's corpse skinned and his hide made into a rug. During the ensuing years Barrabás hide is stored in the basement "until it was rescued by subsequent generations" (119). After Alba returns from the concentration camp and is reunited with her grandfather they decide to clean the big house on the corner and restore

some life to it, which includes bringing Barrabás out of the basement and putting him “where my grandfather had lain him half a century earlier in homage to the woman he loved most in his life” (479). Finally, in the very last few lines of the novel, as Alba reads the first of her grandmother’s diaries that help her reconstruct her family’s history (which will become *The House of the Spirits*) we read: “It begins like this: Barrabás came to us by sea...” (491), thus ending the novel with the same sentence with which it begins. In the epilogue of the novel, Alba feels as if she has lived through all the events of her family’s history—even the ones that take place before she is born: “At times I feel as if I had lived all this before and that I have already written these very words” (490).

The significance of the “spirits” or ghosts in this text, as in other magical realist and fantastic ones is crucial. As Lois Zamora argues in “Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in U.S. and Latin American fiction”,

[Ghosts] are often bearers of cultural and historical burdens, for they represent the dangers, anxieties, and passional forces that civilization banishes. They may signal primal and primordial experience, the return of the repressed, the externalization of internalized terrors. They are always double (here and not) and often duplicitous (where?). They mirror, complement, recover, supplant, cancel, complete. Which is to say: literary ghosts are deeply metaphoric. They bring absence into presence, maintaining at once the “is” and the “is not” of metaphorical truth. (497)

As we shall see, the use of the ghosts in *The House of the Spirits* (particularly those of Ferula and Jaime) allows the other characters and the reader to know the truth about what happens to these former characters after they disappear from the narrative, and of reaching a form of closure denied to them. Throughout the book there are a host of imagined (for example, when Blanca thinks she hears the walking mummies) and other “real” ghosts that appear or simply wander around the house. Crucially, two of the main female characters

return as ghosts. The first is Ferula, Esteban's spinster sister, who returns to announce her death to the family as they sit down to dinner (175) (I will come back to this episode shortly). The second is Clara, who, after her death, continues to haunt (but not in any threatening way) Esteban and Alba in the big house on the corner, as Esteban states: "Fortunately, Clara has returned, or perhaps she never left" (337). There never are any "evil" spirits; in most cases, the spirits come to protect or visit those they love, like Clara does. The only "evil" ones are living characters such as Esteban and his illegitimate grandson Esteban García. The innocent world of the spirits centred on Clara is juxtaposed and contrasted to her staunchly pragmatic husband's world of politics and business. The big house on the corner is constantly filled with Esteban's political acquaintances, as well as with Clara's spiritualist companions the three Mora sisters and various other groups of people, all interested in the supernatural world and the spirits they evoke.

In *Narrative Magic in the Fiction of Isabel Allende*, Patricia Hart argues that the word "spirit" in Allende's novel comes to represent a variety of real and unreal beings:

It has been used literally and ironically to designate supernatural beings; it has evoked the concept of 'the Holy Spirit' in connection with Padre Restrepo [a revolutionary Jesuit priest who comes to Tres Mariás]; it has referred to the essential and activating principle of a person, as in Pedro Tercero's revolutionary spirit; [...] it has stood as a synonym for loyalty or dedication, as in Jaime's spirit as he goes to work in the hospital every day. (95)

In contrast to these good "spirits" are the evil people that appear in a later chapter of the novel, aptly titled "The Terror", which covers the period just after the military coup. As Hart states, "At this point we are faced not with airy spirits, but demons—beings with human form but lacking in human passions or pity. These demons illustrate Allende's idea that the most horrifying ghost story pales by comparison to the actual cruelty that real human beings

are capable of inflicting on each other” (95). There is an obvious parallel between, on the one hand, evil spirits and pragmatism as symbolized by Esteban, and, on the other, good spirits and the strong intuition and clairvoyance as symbolized by Clara. Throughout the book, Esteban’s selfish ambition leads him to commit the worst injustices on his peasants in the form of rapes, beatings, and general tyranny, while Clara’s heightened sense of intuition and spiritualism allows her to prophesy any harm that may befall her loved ones, and most importantly helps Alba and Esteban, in his final days, to find peace, forgiveness, and redemption.

Let us take a closer look at the “actual” spirits and the role they play in the book. Throughout the novel there is always some mention of the spirits evoked by Clara and her spiritualist friends, but there are only a few instances of specific ghosts (mainly those of main characters that have died) that actually interact with the remaining living characters and return for specific purposes. The first important ghost we encounter is that of Ferula, whom Esteban banishes from his house when he senses that her love for Clara is inappropriate. Many years after her banishment, she returns one night in spirit form while the family is gathered around the dinner table. When Ferula’s spirit appears, nothing about her betrays the fact that the figure standing before them is actually a ghost and not the actual woman:

Clara was actually the only one to realize on first glance what was going on, despite the fact that nothing betrayed her state. Ferula stopped three feet from the table, looked at everyone with her empty, indifferent eyes, and advanced toward Clara, who stood up but made no effort to go any closer [...] Ferula approached her, put a hand on each shoulder, and kissed her on the forehead [...] After kissing her sister-in-law, Ferula walked around and went out the way she had come in, closing the door gently behind her. (175)

Ferula's ghost seems to have returned to bid a final farewell to the person she had loved the most in the world, and the only one who had returned her love with kindness. Instead of the typical vision of a scary apparition so often found in the traditional gothic story, Ferula's ghost is described as looking life-like and is a peaceful departing spirit. Ferula's return in spectral form is symbolic in that it allows Ferula and Clara the chance to say goodbye to each other, a chance they were denied because of Esteban's male jealousy and domineering tyranny. In a sense, then, the appearance of Ferula's ghost is an attempt to compensate for a grave injustice done to both her and Clara.

Likewise, after her death, Clara's spirit returns to the big house on the corner, although unlike Ferula, she remains and continues to wander the halls of the house. Even the ever-pragmatic Esteban sees her and senses her continuing presence in the house as an actual spirit, as does Alba:

At first she was just a mysterious glow, but as my grandfather slowly lost the rage that had tormented him throughout his life, she appeared as she had been at her best, laughing with all her teeth and stirring up the other spirits as she sailed through the house. She also helped us write, and thanks to her presence Esteban Trueba was able to die happy, murmuring her name: Clara, clearest, clairvoyant. (489)

It is only in death that Esteban is finally able to receive the love of his wife that he so desired while she was alive, but which eluded him because of his bad temperament and his violence towards Clara herself and Blanca, when he discovered that Blanca and Pedro Tercero were lovers. As is evident from her behaviour as a spirit, it seems that Clara has finally forgiven Esteban and helps in bringing about his final redemption. Thus, as with the appearance of Ferula's ghost, Clara's return as a ghost allows both Esteban and Clara to achieve a harmonious closure that they were never able to experience in life because of Esteban's

violent behaviour. Furthermore, in the epilogue of the novel, after Alba is released from the concentration camp, it is Esteban who encourages her to write down their family memories, for which Alba relies on Clara's diaries. Clara's spirit then becomes symbolic of forgiveness and redemption, and it is this spirit that she passes on to Alba, who, in reassembling her grandmother's diary and writing the story of *The House of the Spirits*, realizes that "It would be very difficult for me to avenge all those who should be avenged, because my revenge would be just another part of the same inexorable rite. I have to break that chain" (490). Like her grandmother before her, Alba is able to make sense of the past and the present, and "see things in their true dimension" (490), as part of a chain of events that inevitably lead from one to the other. Thus, from Clara's spirit, Alba is able to find the personal strength to forgive and, through the act of writing, to go beyond the injustice and torture she experiences at the hands of Esteban García. I will return to the significance of the act of writing in more detail in the next section.

The final significant spirit that appears in the novel is that of Jaime, who had spent most of his life dedicated to helping the poor as a doctor. During the chapter titled "The Terror", Jaime is murdered by the military for being a close friend of the Socialist President they have assassinated, and for refusing to lie and say that the President committed suicide, as the military officers demand of him. At first, Jaime is only reported as missing and his family doesn't know his whereabouts, just like the thousands of other people who were politically persecuted by the military junta and were referred to as the *desaparecidos*. Once they are told the truth by an officer who saw Jaime being executed, Esteban refuses to believe that the military coup that he helped orchestrate could have led to the death of his

son. It is only when Jaime's spirit appears to him that he realizes that the horrible story the officer had recounted to them was indeed true. As Esteban himself narrates,

I called him [Jaime] so many times that I finally saw him, but when he came he was covered with dried blood and rags, dragging streamers of barbed wire across the waxed parquet floors. That was how I learned that he had died exactly as the soldier reported. (429)

Unlike the spirits of Ferula and Clara, Jaime's ghost is closer to the frightful apparitions that appear in ghost stories—even more terrifying, perhaps, as it serves as a horrifying testimony to the all too real historical violence and injustice being committed by the Chilean military regime. Throughout the novel Jaime and Esteban remain ideologically opposed. Jaime is a liberal socialist that believes in all the tenets of a free and equal society, while Esteban as a staunch conservative takes his son's ideas as being a sign of the spread of communism. Thus, although it takes his horrible death to convince Esteban to “begin to speak of tyranny” (429) in relation to the regime, Jaime's spirit triumphs in the end in forcing his father to admit to his mistakes. Thus, the ghosts of Ferula, Clara, and Jaime, in returning after death, are able to help the members of their family achieve the kind of harmonious closure that they were never able to experience in life, and consequently, to correct, enhance and/or reveal, the injustices done to them.

What the spirits of Ferula, Clara, and Jaime also illustrate is that—just as Clara had once told her daughter Blanca—“there was no reason to fear the dead, only the living” (295). As I mentioned earlier, the world of the spirits that Clara inhabits and which Alba inherits is juxtaposed with the pragmatic world of business and progress dominated by Esteban. Towards the end of the novel, as we witness Alba's courage and determination in helping political refugees, participating in a variety of charity work involving orphans and

others equally less fortunate, it becomes obvious that Alba has inherited much of her grandfather's strong will and determination, but has turned it to opposite ends. It is in her character that the best of both worlds—Clara's spiritualism and Esteban's pragmatism—come together to produce the character that writes the magical realist novel that we read, and that makes sense of her family's eccentricities, mistakes, tragedies, and triumphs. The author/Alba is able to reconcile and encompass all the miscellaneous supernatural and natural events into a narrative built upon the merging of two worlds—the magical and the real—into a coherent whole that becomes the novel. As Alba writes in the epilogue, “we cannot gauge the consequences of our acts, and we believe in the fiction of the past, present, and future, but it may also be true that everything happens simultaneously—as the three Mora sisters said, who could see all the spirits of all eras mingled in space” (490). Allende's use of the Gothic and fantastic tradition is politically relevant in that it allows her to give voice to the spirits of the past and those that have been forced into silence, such as the *desaparecidos*. Writing within the tradition of the Gothic and fantastic allows Allende, as it does Martín Gaité, to represent the alternative histories of people who have lived under oppressive dictatorships that have rewritten reality to fulfil their own political and ideological purposes. In both *The House of the Spirits* and *The Back Room*, the alternative of the fantastic is no longer between whether the ghosts or supernatural exist or not, but between two opposed explanations of actual historical events. On one side are the regimes that seek to repress the truth, and, on the other, those who want to bring the truth to the surface. Both writers however were only able to bring their truths to light once they had regained their freedom and thus their voice—in Martín Gaité's case this occurred after Franco's death; Allende had left Chile for Venezuela, and now lives and writes in the United States.

In the next section, the magical world of the spirits will again play a major role, this time in bringing back to the surface the classical definition of the psychological sublime—that which is intimately linked to the experience of terror.

3.3 The Silence of the Sublime: The Theme of Muteness and Terror

In the first section of this chapter I outlined some of the ways in which magical realism as a postmodern mode of the fantastic responds to the radical changes that occur during the first half of the twentieth century by literalizing metaphors relating to repressed fears, and bringing them to the surface. The preoccupation with the sublime and with silence so often found in the tradition of the gothic and the fantastic is dealt with in a similar way in magical realism. The sublime—in all its unrepresentability, its formlessness and its potential power—is recuperated in the *literal* form of colossal natural catastrophes (the invasion of the ants, the earthquake, and the plague of typhoid fever), and secondary archetypal characters (namely, in this case, Rosa the beautiful, and Esteban García) while silence is literalized into physical muteness.

The three major natural disasters that occur in *The House of the Spirits*, in their devastating effects, play a special role in facilitating the reader's acceptance of the actual magical aspects of the novel. The invasion of the ants takes place in Tres Marías, where they appear and eat everything in their path. Esteban Trueba and his foreman Pedro Segundo García attempt to exterminate the ants using pesticides, gasoline, and fire, to no avail. Defeated, Esteban calls in a foreign "specialist" from the city who proposes that they spray the ants with a special formula that will sterilize the male ants, slowly eliminating their

ability to reproduce. The process however will take at least a month in which, Pedro Segundo argues, “they’ll have eaten all the people” (134). When the foreman’s father, the wise old Pedro García, is called, the problem is quickly resolved. Gathering a handful of ants in a handkerchief, old Pedro García takes them all the way to the highway outside of the estate to show them the way out, as he puts it (134). The next morning they wake up to find that the ants have indeed all miraculously disappeared and the furious specialist demands to know how Pedro García managed to do it. Pedro’s simple reply is, “By talking to them, mister. Tell them to go, that they’re a nuisance here. They understand” (135). Naturally, the whole episode seems entirely normal to Clara, but “Ferula latched on to it as proof that they were living in a hole, an inhuman region in which neither God laws nor scientific progress seemed to have made inroads, and that any day now they were all going to be travelling by broom” (135).

The second natural disaster takes place in the city when there is a rapid spread of “exanthemic typhus” (160). Clara refuses to allow Esteban to remove the whole family from the city to the safety of Tres Marías, choosing instead to stay and help the needy and sick as much as possible. When Clara is finally able to get some rest, she relapses into a more pronounced version of her usual spirituality. As the narrator states, “Her notebooks that bore witness to her life grew confused, and her calligraphy lost its convent elegance, degenerating into a series of mangled scribbles that were sometimes so tiny they were impossible to read and sometimes so large that three words would fill a page” (161). Although Clara was not in the least disturbed by Pedro Garcia’s magical handling of the ant plague, the very real sight of human suffering does affect her negatively, disturbing her already fragile balance between the two worlds that she inhabits, the spiritual and the real.

The ordeal she goes through pushes her into the safe world of the spirits, which provide for her an escape from the horrors of reality.

The third major catastrophe is the massive earthquake that takes place while the whole family is in Tres Marías, and which Clara predicts (“There’s going to be an earthquake!”) adding that this time there will be ten thousand dead (186). The description of the actual earthquake takes on monster-like qualities, a source of terror and death: “Most terrible of all was the roar coming from the centre of the earth, that hard-breathing giant that was heard at length, filling the air with fear” (188). The metaphor of the monster rising from the earth endows the very real event (the devastating 1939 earthquake) with a fantastical/magical quality to it. During the earthquake, the main house snaps in half and falls down in ruins on Esteban Trueba, who manages to survive although every bone in his body is crushed. Once again old Pedro García comes to his rescue and proceeds to slowly set all of Esteban’s bones by wrapping them in strips of cloth: “By touch he restored the body so perfectly that the doctors that examined Trueba afterward could not believe such a thing was possible” (190). Again, old Pedro Garcia performs a miracle, not one that is too far beyond the plausible, though a feat of wonder nonetheless. All of these “real” catastrophes serve to highlight the pre-existent awesome and magic-like power of nature, which helps facilitate the reader’s acceptance of the magical events in the story.

The theme of muteness starts very early in the novel, when Clara is still only a little girl in her parent’s house. At the age of nine, Clara secretly witnesses the autopsy of her older sister Rosa who has been mistakenly poisoned by her father’s political enemies. The autopsy is carried out by the family doctor and his young assistant, and the gruesome and horrifying scene that Clara witnesses plunges her into a state of muteness that lasts for nine

years.¹⁵ Clara, peering into the kitchen window, “was able to see the dreadful spectacle of Rosa lying on her back on the marble slab, a deep gash forming a canal down the front of her body, with her intestines beside her on the salad platter” (54). Unable to walk away from the scene, Clara watches until the entire autopsy is finished and her sister is sown back together; “Only then did she slide back into her bed, feeling within her the silence of the entire world. Silence filled her utterly. She did not speak again until nine years later, when she opened her mouth to announce that she was planning to be married” (54). In the second chapter, when I discussed the manifestation of the sublime in “The Fall of the House of Usher”, I argued that the inexpressible horror of Usher’s malaise and the effects of his house upon him are expressed by way of textual silence: the horror is *alluded* to yet never put into words. In *The House of the Spirits*, the theme is literalized into physical and actual muteness: a pointed refusal to speak that lasts nine years. Thus, we find that silence and/or muteness is one of the responses to individual terror, as both Usher and Clara are incapable or unwilling to express in words the horrors of their experience. Despite the horrific event that induces her muteness, Clara is otherwise described as having a wonderful childhood marked by her extensive imagination and her interaction with spirits, “in a world of terrifying stories and calm silences” (102).

There are other instances of characters falling silent. Rosa’s great and unusual beauty was so great that it is said to have intimidated any potential suitors that might have otherwise rushed to ask for her hand. When Esteban Trueba first sees Rosa in church with her family he is immediately struck by her beauty and does everything he can to meet her.

¹⁵ In “Vision and Division: Voyeurism in the Works of Isabel Allende” Elizabeth Gough points out the significance for Allende of Clara’s nine years of silence: “This is the same number of years that elapsed between the coup in Chile in 1973 and the publication in 1982 of her first novel, *The House of the Spirits*, which in large part was a response to that tragedy. With the writing of this novel, as Claudia Marie Kovach has noted, Allende broke ‘the oppression of her own silence’ (95)” (116).

When he is finally invited to her house by her parents he is literally dumbstruck by her beauty: “I couldn’t think of anything to say. I stood there mute, my hat in my hand and my mouth gaping” (36).

Silence is also at the centre of an episode in which the Count Jean de Satigny secretly follows Blanca as she sneaks out of her parent’s house in Tres Marías to go meet her young lover Pedro Tercero by the river late at night. The tableau of the young passionate lovers is presented against what can only be described as a sublime landscape:

The moon was reflected in the water with a glassy brilliance [...]. Absolute silence reigned, and for a moment he had the illusion that he was in the dream of a sleepwalker, in which he walked and walked without getting anywhere, always remaining in the same enchanted place, where time had stopped and where if you tried to touch the trees, which looked within hand’s reach, you found only empty space. (230)

The sublime nature of the scene rests in the way it remains as a suspended moment in time, in which the count “senses” that something is about to happen, that he is about to witness something, and yet he cannot conceive of what “it” is that is about to happen. The illusion he has of walking around in circles, “always remaining in the same enchanted place”, suggests the idea of infiniteness found in the Kantian definition of the sublime (75). The passage is also an example of what Kant describes as a simultaneous feeling of pleasure and pain inspired by the sublime (98). The pleasure afforded by the brilliance of the moon and the breeze in this enchanted place is also a source of pain brought forth by the elusive quality of the moment in which the count seems to wander in circles like a lost “sleepwalker,” unable to grasp the trees and finding only “empty space,” which metaphorically suggests the “negative” aspect of the sublime—its unrepresentable/inexpressible nature. The gap between what the count senses and what he

sees and is unable to articulate is located precisely within that “empty space” surrounded by “absolute silence”. The failure of language to account for the sublime moment results in silence, just as Rosa’s almost frightening beauty and her horrifying corpse inspire physical silence in the form of muteness.

Rosa thus becomes one of the main “figures” of the sublime, on account of her breathtaking unearthly beauty. Just before the autopsy begins, her father, the doctor, and his assistant are all stunned by the magnificence of her transcendent beauty that seems to have intensified even more in death. As the narrator states,

Despite his sturdy character, Severo was overcome when his daughter’s nightgown was lifted to reveal the splendid body of a mermaid [...] Dr. Cuevas too, who had seen Rosa come into this world and knew her like the palm of his own hand, was taken aback at the sight of her nude body. The young assistant began to pant, so overwhelmed was he, and he panted for years to come every time he recalled the extraordinary sight of Rosa naked and asleep on the kitchen table, her long hair sweeping to the floor in a cascade of green. (41)

This passage is an example of the traditional form of hesitation found in the classic fantastic, because although Rosa is famous for her wondrous green hair (which Alba later inherits) and her sea-like qualities, whether her body actually turns into that of a mermaid after death or is just perceived as such by the men that are enchanted by it is never made clear. Suffice it to say that she represents the wondrous quality of the beautifully sublime, although during the autopsy her image of beauty transforms into one of horror, inducing little Clara’s muteness.

Another figure of the sublime, and the most powerful, is Esteban García, Esteban Trueba’s evil illegitimate grandson. Esteban García’s grandmother is the first of many

peasant girls in Tres Marías that Esteban Trueba rapes, and she later poisons the child with hatred and jealousy, always reminding him that were it not for Esteban Trueba's legitimate children with Clara, he might be the heir of Esteban's fortune. From his very first appearance, little Esteban is depicted as a dark child who enjoys torturing animals (in one scene he is shown to be poking the eyes of a chicken with a nail (220)), he is also the one who reveals to Esteban Trueba where Pedro Tercero is hiding after Esteban finds out that he and Blanca are lovers. When Esteban Trueba in a fit of rage cuts off three of Pedro's fingers with an axe, little Esteban holds them "like a bouquet of bloody asparagus" (240). When Esteban García and Alba first meet, he is a young man while she is only a little child, and in her grandfather's library at Tres Marías his overwhelming desire to degrade and destroy her (as the embodiment of everything that had been denied him) leads him to sexually molest her (328). Many years later, the dark figure of Esteban García re-emerges in "The Terror" chapter. By the time of the military coup, he has become an important military colonel and has Alba arrested and brought to him. "Alba immediately recognized the voice of Esteban García. At that moment she understood that he had been waiting for her ever since the distant day when he had sat her on his knees, when she was just a child" (459). Esteban García, then, is the ultimate human embodiment of sublime terror.

We cannot talk of Esteban's García's character without being put in mind of the classical "terror of the sublime" first developed by Burke (54), and its importance within the fabric of this story (particularly after the military coup). For Esteban García, like his grandfather before him, is a force of evil inspiring the kind of terror that leads to silence and the subsequent metaphorical breakdown of language and death, all of which occurs in "The Terror" chapter. Once Esteban García has Alba as his prisoner, he subjects her to all types of

torture and rape, unleashing upon her all his life-long hatred of the Trueba family. It is important to note that all three episodes in which the theme of muteness manifests itself are also episodes in which sexual transgressions occur. In the first episode when Clara witnesses her sister's autopsy, apart from the sexualized image of her beautiful naked body, the doctor's assistant who "pants" at the sight of Rosa's beautiful body also secretly kisses Rosa intimately after the doctor leaves the room. As the narrator recounts, "She [Clara] stayed until the young man she had never seen before kissed Rosa on the lips, the neck, the breasts, and between her legs" (54). In the sublime moment during the beautiful still night, the Count finds Blanca and Pedro in forbidden love-making. Even the "sublime" figure of Ferula is herself in passionate love with Clara and is caught kissing Clara in her sleep by Esteban who consequently throws her out for attempting to seduce his wife with her lesbian desires. As we saw, moreover, the silent and suffering Indian servants in the Count and Blanca's house are subject to the Count's erotic perversions. Finally, and most obviously, in the terror chapter we witness Alba's repeated rape at the hands of Esteban García. Thus, once again, we find a return of the once sublimated subject of the traditional Gothic and fantastic. What is interesting is the way in which this postmodern reworking of the theme of sexual taboo (in this case, incest, necrophilia, and rape) echoes the actual textual silence found in Gothic and fantastic texts. In the postmodern setting of the magical realist text these taboos are ironically *not* silent, where these repressed desires are brought to the surface and explicitly articulated by the text.

The terror that Esteban García unleashes on Alba represents, on a small scale, what happens to the whole country once the generals take over in 1973. A terrifying and totalizing force is let loose as the military mercilessly persecutes any opposition to its

regime; it also sets out to demolish any remnants of the ex-President Allende's party, his supporters, enforcing an artificial sense of harmony and peace. For example, "In a single night, as if by magic, beautifully pruned gardens and flowerbeds appeared on the avenues; they had been planted by the unemployed, to create the illusion of a peaceful spring" (434). After years of shortages (purposefully created by Esteban Trueba and the Conservative Party to bring down the Socialists), "Blanca was amazed to see the stores filled with the products that during the preceding three years had been so scarce and that now appeared in the shop windows as if by magic" (424). The military even goes so far as to alter history: "With a stroke of a pen the military changed world history, erasing every incident, ideology, and historical figure of which the regime disapproved" (435). In *The House of the Spirits* the culmination of these terrible events is the death of "the Poet" (a direct reference to Pablo Neruda), a greatly-loved national symbol of love, liberty, and art. His funeral, which both Alba and the eighty-year old Esteban Trueba attend (although Esteban and 'the Poet' are ideological rivals), is at first a silent procession of mourners: "People went in silence" (441). However, soon the mourners begin to chant and grieve for the loss of their President and their freedom, and the Swedish media filming the funeral "send back to Nobel's frozen land the terrifying image of machine guns posted on both sides of the street, people's faces, the flower-covered coffin, as well as the silent group of women clustered in the doorway of the morgue" (441). During these horrible days, Alba describes the frequency of the arrests on civilians during the night: "Then the long silence would return, lasting until dawn, when the city reawakened and the sun seemed to erase the terrors of the night" (443). Again, these passages are replete with words that are also used in association with the sublime—but without the beauty and pleasure that come with the pain: "terrifying" and "silent". The

totalizing terror of this new dictatorship leads to a silence born out of the subject's inability to both conceive of and express the violence/death occurring before him or her.

Crucially 'The Terror' is the only chapter of the novel in which the magical occurrences are suddenly suspended. Upon her arrest, Alba tries to call to the spirits for help: "She invoked the spirits of the days of the three-legged table and her grandmother's restless sugar-bowl, and all the spirits capable of bending the course of events, but they appeared to have abandoned her, for the van continued on its way" (459). The only seemingly "unreal" things that occur are those mentioned above, the military's attempts to rewrite history and the present events to suit their own purposes. But then, those are not magical at all.

Why does the magic come to a halt during this chapter? Hart argues that the novel begins with a strong emphasis on Clara's clairvoyance and her interactions with the spiritual world as an aspect of her naturally passive nature, that she is simply a product of a sheltered and nurturing childhood. As she states, "Clara's childhood is a fantasy of permissiveness in which she is left to develop her creativity (represented by psychic powers) without the strictures of a normally repressive education" (51). Further on Hart argues that

Clara [...] is an essentially passive human being, and her passivity in a metaphorical sense is closely related to and excused by her clairvoyance [...] Clara uses her clairvoyance as an excuse for nonaction. It can also be seen as a metaphor for passivity itself. If this is true, then perhaps the "magic" element of the clairvoyance is not simply introduced for fun and then abandoned arbitrarily. If clairvoyance is a metaphor for female passivity, then it is essential that this magic diminish gradually and finally be replaced by something better in Alba's generation, when she and women like Ana Diaz [one of Alba's fellow revolutionary prisoners] begin to accept responsibility for the world in which they live. (53)

Hart's argument is a feminist interpretation of why the magical dimension in *The House of the Spirits* gradually diminishes as the novel progresses, and younger more revolutionary female characters like Alba take on a more central role. In "Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real, Morrison and Allende on Call", P. Gabrielle Foreman argues that in *The House of the Spirits*, "the stronger the historical moment, the more distant the magical—as if to counter the threat of history becoming 'merely' enchanted and so subsumed" (295).

However, another way of interpreting the loss of magic, especially in "The Terror" chapter, would be that the totalizing framework of terror installed by the military dictatorship brings about the death of any alternative view of reality. As I said earlier, the only way to represent an alternative view to that presented by those in power is when the oppressed, the *desaparecidos*, the magical spirits, are able to regain or find access to their voice. The terrors of this new repressive regime literally "silence" the magical voices of the spirits, and bring forth a kind of political terror that is analogous to (though not the same as) the terror induced by the Burkean sublime. The political terror is similar to the terror of the sublime in the way it excites fear (of death and pain), which Burke argues "effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning" (77). We see an example of this when Alba finds herself unable to communicate with the spirit of Clara, and loses all sense of time and place as she is repeatedly raped and tortured by Esteban García. Burke argues that this type of all encompassing fear, however, contains an element of pleasure when the pain or fear of danger is experienced at a safe distance. In this way, his formulation of the terror derived from the sublime is very different to the political terror we find in *The House of the Spirits*, which induces no form of pleasure, both because it is an illustration of human suffering, and even more so because that we know that it is an all too real historical experience. As Maria Beville states in *Gothic Postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity*,

While experiences of terror still carry the same intensity, the sources of terror in postmodern societies have a more profound resonance than the physical terrors of previous eras. Defined by loss of value and meaning, ephemerality, dissolution and vastitude, the existence of the postmodern subject is terrifyingly unreal and undefinable and this is apart from the obvious terrors of living, alienated in our postmodern world of violence and political terrors. (49)

Beville's words can be applied to both *The House of the Spirits* and *The Back Room*, novels in which two female writers attempt to represent the "undefinable" fears of living under oppressive dictatorships. Both write their novels about the lives lived during these terrible times many years after they have taken place: *The Back Room* is published only after Franco's death in 1975, and *The House of the Spirits* was written while Allende was living in exile in Venezuela in 1982. In both cases, these writers are only able to revisit their past and attempt to make sense of it, vis-à-vis their writing, once they have freed their voices from the tyrannical regimes that had for so long silenced them. More significant, however, is how both writers use versions of the fantastic to recount the events of the past that had been distorted by regimes that put forth only one "official" version of history. For Martín Gaité the metaphor of the back room of memory is conjured up by the mysterious visit of a stranger, and for Allende the "spirits" of the past are brought forth by the diaries of the clairvoyant Clara that provide an alternative account of Chilean history. This helps us understand how and why after the military coup the magic in *The House of the Spirits* is temporarily silenced in "The Terror" chapter, and is only resumed once Alba is freed and rewriting her grandmother's memoirs in the epilogue. We have seen earlier the contrast between the good "spirits" (the peaceful ghosts and the good spirits of people like Jaime) and the evil living demons (like Esteban García). The evils inflicted by people like Esteban García are so pronounced and horrific, that they silence the magical aspects of the narrative.

Once the magical voices are silenced, the traditional hesitation of the fantastic between whether the supernatural exists or not is dispelled, and is re-located onto the historiographic problem and the interpretation of alternative histories. That is, the relocation of the fantastic occurs when different interpretations are proposed between the “official” version supported by those in power and those in opposition to it. The voices of opposition are thus forced to seek alternative channels to the “official” version. When terror is unleashed, however, this relocation goes a step further: the traumatic, stark reality of the horrors inflicted does not allow for any displacement onto an alternate, fantastic reality: the horrors are just too real and tangible to be displaced, at least as they occur; so there can only be silence, and only silence can be opposed to the version of events imposed by the regime. No alternative is possible until one can regain the possibility of a voice. While Alba is Esteban’s prisoner and in the concentration camp, she is unable to conjure up her grandmother’s spirits for help. It is only when she is freed and decides to forgive the injustices done to her that she is able to free herself of Esteban’s silence-inducing terror, and find her voice to write her own version of Chile’s history.

What we find in *The House of the Spirits* and *The Back Room* is a continuation of the traditional role of the fantastic in giving a possible alternative voice for themes of the repressed, hence the haunting of the past within the present. *The Back Room* is haunted by all the remnants of the back room of memories of a life lived under the looming shadows of Franco’s regime, just as *The House of the Spirits* is haunted by the silenced voices of the *desaparecidos*, and all those who lost their voices under the military junta of Chile. On a textual level, both texts are haunted by the influential mode of their Gothic and fantastic predecessors.

Conclusion

All of the three aspects I have been exploring—the Gothic themes of the house and of the spirits, the theme of muteness, and the silence of the sublime—are manifested as literalized metaphors. Magical realism as a literary mode is “haunted” by its Gothic origins and fantastic past, and the recuperated Gothic themes that wander in and out of the text are like the spirits that wander the halls of the Truebas’ house. Likewise, the sublime manifests itself through the actual characters (like Clara’s muteness) and massive natural disasters (e.g. the earthquake) that become literalized metaphors for various characteristics of the sublime (excessive, forceful, destructive). In each of these figures of the sublime, some reference is always made to silence or muteness, as the text’s way of signalling that a particular characteristic of the sublime is at play.

The process of the literalization of metaphor, whereby the metaphor is magically transformed into actual literal form, is symbolic of the way in which magical realism has managed to rejuvenate the mode of the fantastic and make it more adaptable and relevant to the concerns of postmodern poetics. Magical realism has not dispensed with Todorov’s condition that the character must hesitate between two possible alternative interpretations of the fantastical event. Instead, magical realism has merely redirected that hesitation towards our uncertainty about the ontological statuses of such concepts of world, reality, and fiction (as we see in *The Back Room*) or historiographic interpretations, as we see in *The House of the Spirits*. The postmodern reader immersed in a magical realist text (usually) knows with absolute certainty that much of what happens in the story could not have happened in “real” life. But the postmodern reader cannot also quell all the various

questions that are put forth both overtly and covertly by the parallels, metaphors, symbols, and images littered throughout the text. Furthermore, because of the way it infuses the mundane world of everyday life with magical events, magical realism is always inherently exploring different facets of the sublime. As Beville states, "Magical realism is a style that is identifiable in its depiction of the sublime energy that exists in the co-presence of the marvellous and the tedious of the everyday. In classifying a work as such, it is this co-presence of the magical and the real that is all important" (125). It is the "sublime energy" generated by the "co-presence" of the marvellous and the mundane that endows magical realism with its own "fantastic charge". For as McHale argues against Todorov, the "'banalization' of the fantastic actually sharpens and intensifies the confrontation between the normal and the paranormal" (76-77). It is within this space of confrontation between two ontologically opposing worlds that the intellectual uncertainty plaguing the postmodern mind reveals itself.

Chapter Four
New Frontiers:
Importing Magical Realism

In the second chapter of this study I argued, using Carmen Martín Gaité's *The Back Room*, that the fantastic does not, as Todorov held, conclude with Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* but adapts and develops, continuing to be a valid form for exploring twentieth-century concerns. Then, in the third chapter, I chose Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* to investigate the ways in which magical realist fiction, like the traditional fantastic before it, is based on the juxtaposition of two opposing worlds, the real and the unreal and borrows or reincorporates specific elements from its Gothic and fantastic predecessors to explore its own postmodern and political concerns. Alongside the other texts that I have used thus far and their areas of origin (Europe and Latin America), the Canadian text I discuss in this chapter, Jack Hodgins's *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne* (1979), will be useful to follow the trajectory of fantastic literature as it has developed over time, and to illustrate the international nature of the fantastic and magical realism. Hodgins's novel shows—literally, as we shall see—how magical realism travels north to the farthest western edge of Canada and manages to adapt itself to suit the concerns of the highly localized voice of Hodgins's Vancouver Island. The two major aspects of the text I will focus on are the way in which Hodgins “imports” the genre of magical realism to examine the links between the geographical space of Vancouver Island—and more specifically, the location of Port Annie at

the “ragged green edge of the world” (35)—and its inhabitants; and how this space on the “edge” transforms into a “textual space”—a narrative that utilizes a central spatial metaphor, that of the edge of the world—to explore how literary forms can represent the existence of the magical within the mundane, liminal and in-between states, alternative perceptions, explanations, histories, and senses of communities. In the second section of this chapter, I will explore the ways in which the text associates this “space” with the metafictional and metatextual (self)reflection and testing of textual forms through which the history, myths, and nature of the place and its inhabitants can be represented. This chapter, then, will focus on the idea of the journey—the journey of the fantastic as it evolves into magical realism, and magical realism’s journey as it moves further North—and the spiritual journey that the inhabitants of Port Annie (led by the resurrection of Joseph Bourne) are eventually forced into by the uncontrollable forces of nature that surround them, freeing them from the meaningless mundane existence they have unconsciously sunken into.

4.1 The Farthest Edge of the World: Living on the Edge and Textual Space

The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne takes place in the town of Port Annie, founded, according to local myth, by Fat Annie Fratenburg, who first appeared as a giant whale on the beach and then transformed into a woman. The narrative, however, begins decades later in the aftermath of a giant tidal wave that delivers onto the streets of the town a Peruvian freighter, a host of dead sea life, and a beautiful Peruvian woman whose sensual walk threatens to seduce the male population of the town and throws the curious residents into a state of excitement. It soon transpires that she is looking for Joseph Bourne, the town’s old

and eccentric radio host who has chosen, bafflingly, to live by the squatters flats on the outskirts of the town.

Like many of the other characters that make up the population of Port Annie, Joseph Bourne has moved to the “ragged green edge of the world” (35) to escape a former life. Unlike the other townspeople, however, he has no recollection of his past life. When he is asked to interview the Peruvian woman, Raimey, at first he adamantly refuses for reasons unknown to us. When he is finally forced to conduct the interview he is so overcome that he dies, but Raimey magically resurrects and nurses him back to life. The Bourne that emerges from his little hut after this episode is a complete reversal of the odd temperamental recluse he once was. With the help of the lonely librarian Larry Bowman, who has fallen hopelessly in love with Raimey, the townspeople discover that Bourne is a celebrated international poet that had travelled the world, led a life full of adventure and philanthropy until he suddenly disappeared from the world, only to turn up in Port Annie without any memory of his past life. Having regained his memory, Bourne suddenly becomes the most energetic and helpful of men, with time to tutor little foreign children, to cure people’s ailments, and generally help anyone who might need his assistance in any way. Bourne is described as “Living so many lives at once—now that he’d bounced back from the grave, defying all the natural laws of the world—he was always late, always hurrying, always eating on the run, as if he intended to learn how to be everywhere at once, how to touch everyone’s life at once like the rain” (196).

It is clear, already from this basic description of the text, that the remote geography of little Port Annie is just as important as its inhabitants. Two main points deserve attention in terms of the geography of the text. Firstly, this story’s setting in a very a remote area of

western Canada is reminiscent of all those remote geographies that we find in Gothic and fantastic fiction, although here the main location consists of a whole town and there is no hint of oldness or the sense of anything sinister. I will briefly discuss the significance of location here, and return to it in more depth in the next chapter. Secondly, the remoteness of Port Annie—with its perilous existence on an inlet surrounded by mountains that threaten to collapse under the incessant rain that plagues the area and a volatile sea that threatens to swallow the whole town—emphasises the futility of mankind’s arbitrary attachment to superficial *things* that can be taken away or lost at any moment in such an unpredictable place. More importantly, it reveals the vulnerability of mankind in the face of uncontrollable and powerful forces of nature, themselves a natural source of wonder and awe.

In “Regionalism and Urbanism”, Janice Fiamengo points out that,

Canada’s vast distances, natural barriers, diverse patterns of settlement, and locally specific histories have led many commentators to see regionalism as a defining feature of Canadian culture. George Woodcock articulated a widely held view when he asserted that Canadian literary traditions have always been fundamentally regional, developing differently in different parts of the country.¹⁶ (241)

This kind of regionalism, Fiamengo continues, “examines the impact of a distinctive terrain, topography, and climate upon the people who experience them, sometimes suggesting quasi-mystical explanations for the force of geography” (242). Fiamengo’s comment provides the link between the quality of the geography of Port Annie—its

¹⁶ George Woodcock, *Northern Spring: The Flowering of Canadian Literature* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1987) 21.

remoteness and vulnerability to the forces of nature—and the deeper psychological results that stem from it (the reliance on myth as a source of meaning).

Whether one is a proponent of literary regionalism or not, it isn't hard to see that, at least in *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*, the geography of Vancouver Island plays a prominent role in the story and constitutes the main source of the “magical” elements of the text. The tidal wave sweeps in “with enough force to leave salt water and sand, stunned fish and shreds of tortured driftwood on the streets and front yards of houses for two rows up the hill. Long strips of kelp and seedy knots of seaweed lay in doorways, starfish and blue mussels bloomed like brilliant flowers in the spongy grass, and periwinkles spilled themselves like tiny jewels across the roads” (14). This magical scene of marine life “decorating”, as it were, the streets of the town, infusing the drab little town with the glossy brilliance of the sea, is a prime example of how, because of where Port Annie is situated, its residents are subjected to a host of strange and magic-like events, much of them stemming from the surrounding nature—both sea and land. In “Variations on Magical Realism”, Jeanne Delbaere-Garant explores different types of magical realism, particularly in relation to their geographical and cultural origin, and states that, “In the New World, where the climate is often less temperate and the landscapes more dramatic than in Britain, magical realism does indeed often display a deep connectedness between character and place” (252). Further on in the essay she adopts the term “mythic realism”¹⁷ to “apply it not just to the Canadian West but to all the countries that still possess ‘unconsumed space,’ where ‘magic’ images are borrowed from the physical environment itself, instead of being

¹⁷ The term “mythic realism” is first suggested by Michael Ondaatje in his afterword to O'Hagan's *Tay John*: “‘The landscape [...] is not a landscape that just sits back and damns the character with droughts. It is quicksilver, changeable, human – and we are no longer part of the realistic novel, and no longer part of the European tradition.’ ‘Mythic realism,’ Ondaatje suggests, would be a more apt way of portraying the west than ‘magical realism’” (252).

projected from the characters psyches” (253). The idea of “mythic realism” is appropriate in describing Hodgins’s narrative because of the way he blends elements of the mythic (the myth of Fat Annie), the magical (Raimey), and the real (the mundane details of the townspeople’s lives) to create a novel that is true to the topography it depicts. Rather than simply adopt the magical realism of Latin America, he adapts it to suit his own purposes. His ability to do so illustrates the fluid nature of the fantastic and magical realism—that it can adapt and evolve to take on a variety of forms internationally.

Some examples will help identify where and how the magic is utilized in this text. The young single lady, Angela Turner, finds that the tidal wave has dropped into her bed a handsome Peruvian sailor with whom she spends three magical days and nights. As she contemplates leaving Port Annie for a more exciting life in the city she wonders,

yet how many places could you live where a Peruvian sailor could land in your bed out of the sea, where dead men could come back to life and grouchy old cranks turn into famous celebrities, where the grass and sidewalks were studded with beautiful shells and glittering stones from the ocean [...] as if they multiplied by themselves, or as if someone was scattering them around in the night while no one was looking? (85)

The magic-like qualities of some of the events that take place in Port Annie do provide its residents with a sense of wonder and amazement.

Larry Bowman, the lonely awkward librarian, falls head over heels in love with Raimey. In one scene, he watches her fish a little too successfully and thinks, “She cast that line like a spell out over the sea, and stood motionless as a dark goddess on the edge to wait for the spell to take” (164). Much of the magic in this scene is due to the beautiful figure of Raimey and her effortless ability to attract the fish to her line, and the beauty of the

surrounding nature, but Raimey herself is a magical creature that was brought in by the sea. In other instances, some of the descriptions of the surroundings are another way to show how nature infuses magic onto the otherwise very drab looking town. Angela Turner thinks of the things she would miss about Port Annie: “The chilled silence, for example. And it was a breathtakingly beautiful spot—the dark water, that steep green mountain across the inlet when the shreds of mist were caught in its feathery trees” (60).

The arrival of Raimey is Hodgins’s literal way of signalling his “importation” of magical realism into a narrative about the Canadian experience of life in Vancouver Island (I will return later to a discussion of how the freighter’s journey is symbolic of travelling literary forms). Like the magical realism that develops in Latin America (albeit, there, with a greater socio-political agenda) Hodgins’s version is also heavily influenced by geography. In *The House of the Spirits*, we saw how the “wildness” and unpredictability of natural forces such as the invasion of the ants and the earthquakes add to the magical setting of the narrative. In Allende’s work, as in other Latin American magical realist works such as Gabriel García Márquez’s, the wonder stemming from the surrounding nature make the actual supernatural events that occur seem like a further extension of the magic that can be found in the everyday life of the characters that populate these environments. This is not to say that magical realism only stems from exotic rural geographies, of course: Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* and Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* are prime examples of magical realist works set largely in the heart of London’s urban landscape; but it is the case that Alejo Carpentier’s words in “On the Marvellous Real in America” apply to Hodgins’s work, as much as they do to Latin American magical realist writings: the marvellously real, Carpentier argues, is “the

heritage of all of America, where we have not yet begun to establish an inventory of our cosmogonies” (87).

The proximity of the ocean to the town of Port Annie, in particular, plays a vital role in the narrative. The initial tidal wave that brings a beautiful woman, a handsome sailor, and an amazing amount of marine life through the streets of the town also triggers a chain of natural and unnatural events that will change the lives of the townspeople forever. The setting of Port Annie “at the ragged green edge of the world”, a place that “keeps slipping into the sea” (134), and is “far away from the whole world” (134), brings to the forefront the idea of periphery, of being at the edge between two worlds, land and sea. In fact, the actual location of Port Annie, on the west coast of the island located on the west coast of Canada, places it literally on the edge of the edge of the continent. The overarching idea of the periphery or edge manifests itself in two ways in regards to Hodgins’s work: on a general level it can be seen as symbolic of the blurred lines between the real and unreal in magical realism; more specifically, it emphasizes the continuous struggle for survival and the search for meaning for a vulnerable town living under such precarious environmental conditions.

This peripheral location has a key role in the textual space of the magical realist genre. By definition, magical realism occupies the liminal space between the magical and the real. It grounds itself by including descriptive passages of minute realistic detail that situate it clearly within the “real” world, while it also includes the intrusion of magical events from the world of the supernatural. It is, as McHale argues of the postmodern fantastic, “a frontier between this world and the world next door [the supernatural]” (75). For, as Wendy B. Faris states in *Ordinary Enchantments*, “The more realistic the details, the more magically amazing the phenomenon” (92). In *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*, the day-to-day lives

of the townspeople is given to us in great detail, from Angela Turner's dreams of moving to a big city and a more exciting life, to Larry Bowman's obsession with discerning hidden pornographic images in liquor ads, and the townswomen's insatiable desire to know everybody's business. In the town of Port Annie, the only truly exciting things that take place are those that have been brought in by the waves of the sea (Fat Annie's magical arrival as a whale, Raimey's resurrection of Bourne, and the ensuing changes this brings about). In *Bourne*, the physical peripheral location of the town becomes a literalized metaphor for the textual space occupied by magical realism. On one side there is the magic, symbolized by the rejuvenating/resurrecting qualities of the vast infinite ocean, and on the other side are the mountains acting as natural barriers that not only limit the expansion of the town inland but also symbolize the limits of how far the magic (represented by the sea) can extend, grounded as it is by the reality of the world.

Alongside the exploration of the sources of the true wonder emanating from the natural setting, and from the resurrected figure of Bourne (I will discuss his role in the second section of this chapter), there are also attempts at creating artificial sources of wonder, as in the futile efforts by characters such as Mayor Weins, Jeremy Fell, and Damon West to enforce their own ideas of "progress" to make Port Annie special enough to attract tourists and big businesses. Mayor Weins, for example, is constantly trying to find ideas to put Port Annie on the map, seeing the town as an extension of his own self-worth as a mayor, "Because it drove the mayor crazy that no one out there had ever heard of Port Annie. And it made him furious that year after year no real tourists ever came in to visit" (101). One of his grand schemes is the idea of getting the largest living cactus imported from Arizona to serve as a tourist attraction. Thus "expensive glass walls were installed in

the cactus tower, the complicated humidifiers added, and the electric heater with thermostat control wired up, and two suspended Mill workers hired to act as caretakers for Canada's Largest-Natural-Growing Cactus" (233). But all of the Mayor's misguided efforts are in vain, when the only tourists that do arrive (actually a family from Arizona that were only driving by) tell the Mayor that the cactus is dead. "The poor thing had been subjected to such a series of shocks—uprooted over land and sea, rained on and saturated to the point of nearly exploding, burned by heat lamps, dried out by electric heaters, [...]—that it had shrivelled and dropped in its enforced afterlife and slumped against its glass wall like a boneless drunk" (265). In effect, the Mayor's attempts to perform a "miracle" by importing a foreign mammoth of a plant does not elicit any sense of wonder or amazement in anyone; instead, it stands as a pathetic testimony to the idea that artificial and enforced attempts at miracles can only end in failure. The Mayor would probably have been much more successful in bringing in tourists had he relied on the natural beauty of the surrounding ocean and mountains. As Jenny the ex-stripper describes the inlet: "Everything was green, even the dark water which mirrored the green mountain. The tide was in, full and calm [...] that cactus couldn't have looked more out of place, or ridiculous" (180-181).

Two other characters that also attempt to bring "progress" to the town are Jeremy Fell and Damon West. They both work for a major contracting company that hopes to build large commercial projects in the area. Fell has been sent to scope out the town and study its inhabitants, while the attractive West is brought in to "sell" the idea of the development project to the townspeople as the beginnings of a bright and prosperous future for Port Annie. As Fell thinks to himself, "These people in the south just had to sit tight and wait for his reports; he ignored their impatient notes and phone calls and did all he could to get close

to people, [...] it was so he could play his part in bringing them progress and development” (110). Again, we find the idea of *imported* “progress”—a form of progress, moreover, based on commodity and consumerism and not any substantial form of real improvement of the lives of the townspeople. Like the Mayor, Fell is motivated by his own self-interests—a dying man, he dreams of making some sort of difference before he leaves and hearing the people of the town say, “*Jeremy you did it, you’ll make us all rich, you’ve brought a future to a place that had none at all!*” (110). Fell’s use of the word “brought” is significant in that it points out the town’s lack of any substantial future. Port Annie seems to be liminal/peripheral not only in geographical, but in historical terms as well—stuck as it is between a mythical past and a lack of future.

In his speech to the townspeople of Port Annie, Damon West appropriates the story of the founding woman of the town, Fat Annie, to persuade them that they must continue with the spirit of progress of which she was the living embodiment: “the spirit that has made the world what it is, the spirit of the frontier, the spirit that made people like Fat Annie Fratenburg and her husband roll up their sleeves, put their shoulders to the wheel, spit on their hands, and yell *Go! Progress!*” (304). In their misguided spirit of commodified progress, the Mayor and West attempt to forcibly appropriate the myth of Fat Annie by transforming her into another tourist attraction. As with the giant cactus, the Mayor determines to exhibit Fat Annie, who now lives in an upstairs room, her body all shrivelled up. He physically carries her down the stairs, but in doing so he trips and lets go of her body, which is flung through the window, landing outside the bar in which all the townspeople are gathered, and resulting in her death (311-312). The Mayor’s attempts to commodify the myth of Fat Annie held dearly by most of the inhabitants results in yet another disaster. He

literally manages to kill a living legend, the mythical creature who founded the town. Even before the mudslide that comes down and engulfs the town of Port Annie, killing so many, the Mayor has effectively instigated the beginning of the end of the town as the inhabitants know it. An alternative reading of this series of events is that the death of Fat Annie itself is what causes the mudslide; in fact, it is not possible to decide once and for all whether the landslide is natural or whether it has been set off by the death of the town's founder; the hesitation between, or simultaneous validity of, the alternative explanations makes this another example of the fantastic. Significantly, the morning after Fat Annie is killed, the rain finally stops and the Earth begins to tremble:

Larry looked up and saw a piece of the mountain's face begin to slip, trees and all, as if an invisible knife had sliced it away. It was so unexpected, so incongruous, that he laughed. This was impossible. All over town jays exploded up into the air and flew off in the direction of the inlet, where gulls, already screeching, led them away. The air vibrated: a low rumble, a threatening growl. He got into the car quickly – he'd witnessed slides before now, the world was about to fall in. (315)

The description of the mudslide is reminiscent of the description of the massive earthquake that rocks Chile in Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, which is also attributed monstrous qualities that remind us that the Earth is itself a source of unpredictable and terrible power—an underlying theme in many magical realist texts, drawing and shedding light on the potential magic that lies in the world around us. As I pointed out earlier, magical realist texts use nature and the world (and its ability to instil awe, wonder, and fear) to undermine the idea that a clear-cut reality (that abides by known laws) is the only valid representation available to us. When Eva McCarthy, in Hodgins's novel, states that "Everything in this world has its rational explanation" (260), Jenny contradicts this by thinking "There were still some

mysteries left, thank goodness, and lots of room for new ways of looking at things” (260). Thus, as Ian Higgins comments in the afterword of the novel, “The mudslide reveals that earth can be as world-altering as water” (345). The apocalyptic mudslide stemming from the mountains, which, as I have argued, act as a physical border marking the limits of the town as well as symbolically counterbalancing the magical properties of the ocean through the solid grounding of concrete reality, finally reverses this notion by instigating another major shift in the lives of the people of Port Annie, this time coming from the land. Even the anchoring properties of physical land can tremble and shake the Earth to its very core, turning the world upside down as the tidal waves of the ocean had done in the opening chapter of the novel. When the two elements of water and earth collapse into each other as they do in the end with the mudslide, the demarcation between the two elements is blurred, symbolic of the co-mingling of the magical and the real.

4.2 Waiting for Annie: Death and Resurrection

In the previous section I discussed the idea of the “edge” as both the actual location of the town of Port Annie and a textual space in which the opposing worlds of the magical and mundane intermingle. I have also looked at the mundane attempts by some of the characters to enforce an artificial and superficial type of “progress” on the townspeople of Port Annie, all of which fail and result in death. In this section I would like to focus on the “magical” elements of the story that lead to the resurrection of some of the more redeeming characters of the novel. That is not to say that I am proposing the idea that the mundane is symbolic of death, and the magical of life, but, rather, that the intermingling of the two—an equal balance of the grounding properties of the real and the rejuvenating

aspects of the magical—is what leads to the creation of the transformative textual space that we find at the “ragged green edge of the world”.

In *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*, there aren't as many magical or supernatural elements as we find in more traditional magical realist works, such as those by Allende, Márquez, or Rushdie, where the reader witnesses first hand magical occurrences as they unfold. Many of the truly “magical” happenings in Hodgins's novel are related to the myth of Fat Annie as recounted by the characters in the novel. What we find in *Bourne* is a more restrained effort to bring out the magic-like qualities that can exist in such a unique land situated between two opposing forces of nature—water and earth. However, it is precisely for this reason that I have chosen to include Hodgins's work in my discussion of magical realism: to explore the ways in which the genre has the ability to travel, evolve, and adapt across a variety of different cultures, regions, and society.

There are three main extra-ordinary figures that largely contribute to the resurrection of the town. The first is, of course, the beautiful Raimey who travels all the way from South America. As Lucia Boldrini argues in “The Ragged Edge of Miracles, Or, A Word or Two on Those Jack Hodgins Novels,”

The route followed by Raimey to reach Port Annie is significant. The miraculous girl comes from Barbados, the easternmost isle of the West Indies. She meets Joseph Bourne's wife in Jamaica, then boards a ship bound south, crosses South America from east to west, boards a northbound freighter, and rides into Port Annie on the crest of the wave cause by an Alaskan earthquake. The earth itself has moved to rush her here. Her journey reproduces the metaphoric journey of ‘marvellous realism.’ First experienced by European explorers, it then travels across South America, acquiring different versions of itself as it goes. It subsequently moves north towards Canada (picking up echoes of the American myth of the frontier on the way). The journey is

literally metaphoric: it bears across borders that are thus annulled in a cultural *trans-latio* and metamorphosis. (89-90)

Raimey herself is described as a “sea bird” (3), indicative of her being almost a mythical hybrid creature, part animal part human, as she strolls across the streets of Port Annie that has been turned upside down by the marine life littering the streets so that “she might just as well have been walking on the bottom of the ocean” (3). Thus her extraordinary arrival signals the arrival of magical realism having undergone an extensive journey of metamorphosis and change, now adapted to the unique locale of Hodgins’s Vancouver Island and the life of its inhabitants. It is important to note that Raimey, although reminiscent of other famous magical realist beauties such as Rosa in *The House of the Spirits* and Remedios the Beauty of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is not described as being an ethereal beauty but, rather, a sensual one, with a “cheeky behind”, “gorgeous legs” and “beautiful hips” (12) that drive the men to distraction. This sexy description of Raimey is both evocative of those other “other-worldly” beauties and also one who is more “earthy”—a figure more in line with Hodgins’s own form of magical realism. Like the other beauties, however, she is able to alter the setting around her, and affect those that come in contact with her. For example, when Larry Bowman finally comes in direct contact with Raimey, he feels distinctly different and changed: “The wet greenish buildings of Port Annie looked foreign; he’d stepped out of their world into something else and knew that he couldn’t return, like someone heavily drugged who feels a thick invisible extra skin between himself and the rest of the world, setting himself apart, giving everything the frightening unpredictable air of the unreal” (166). Even when she leaves Port Annie, aspects of her extraordinary character are left behind or “dispersed” as Boldrini puts it: “Rita Rentella inherits her walk (150); Angela Turner, her laughter (172); Kamalijit, Mr Manku’s grandson,

the light in her eyes (195); Jenny, in her final regenerating erotic dance, her grace (268)” (90). Again, Raimey as the literal embodiment of magical realism transforms—albeit in little ways—the lives of some of the townspeople. Or maybe, these characters had always held these qualities, and her arrival simply makes them notice the little bits of magic that already existed in them, unnoticed. Whether these characters inherit some of her qualities, or these qualities only become apparent once the townspeople are awakened to the little sources of wonder that lay around them is for the reader to decide. However, it is the arrival of magical Raimey that instigates it. It is important to note the difference between the changes Raimey’s arrival helps bring about and the type of materialistic and superficial “progress” that the Mayor, Fell, and West try to impose on the town. Although Raimey is an outsider to the town (literally brought in by the tidal wave), she manages to enhance the good aspects of the townspeople, and consequently the town itself, unlike Fell and West who hope to bring other’s ideas of progress. Raimey’s journey on the ship that brings her to Port Annie can also be contrasted to that of the conquistadores that had come to America to steal wealth, under the pretence of bringing progress and civilization, not unlike Fell and West themselves.

The second “magic-like” figure is that of Joseph Bourne, whom we initially find as a solitary odd man, dressed in rags with no memory of his former life. His exact death and resurrection are never revealed to the reader, we only know that upon seeing Raimey he collapses and is revived and restored to health by her in his dwelling by the squatter’s flats, which is even closer to the edge of the sea than the town itself. More importantly, Bourne suddenly regains his memory of his past life as a celebrated poet, world-traveller, and do-gooder. Larry Bowman as a librarian has access to all the newspapers and archival

material that he needs to research Bourne's identity once it becomes known that he was once an international celebrity, and he finds photos and articles that testify to that:

Bourne working miracles among the poor. Bourne making a speech to a roomful of cabinet members [...]. Bourne addressing a whole village of Indians who had marched hundreds of miles through the snows of winter to see this man who was supposed to save people from starvation and poverty by whatever magic he had. A man who could be everywhere at once and heal the world. (82)

These images of Bourne are a testament to both his human and his mythical status, addressing governments and sitting behind a desk, yet also performing miracles and bringing salvation to those in need. Like Raimey, he is thus described as a hybrid supernatural being, part human part prophet, even a "Christ-like figure" (222); and like Raimey, he is another living embodiment of magical realism itself—simultaneously real and magical. When Larry describes Bourne's life to the people gathered to listen to him, and the many times Bourne had simply disappeared off the face of the earth only to re-emerge alive and rejuvenated, he comes to the "natural" conclusion that "it did explain why the man might be easier to bring back to life than another person might be; he was used to it, it was always happening to him" (83). As is typical of magical realist narratives, the "impossible" or "magical" is naturalized, though in this case most of the events of Bourne's life are extraordinary but not actually supernatural, just highly improbable. It is important to point out at this point that these events are what Todorov would define as uncanny, while the magical figure of Raimey is closer to his definition of the marvellous. What we find, then, is that magical realism is thus able—by mixing these once distinct categories together—to create a modern version of the fantastic, one in which the coexistence of the uncanny and the marvellous invites us to see these events as both *perhaps* magical and yet possible though *improbable*.

Once Bourne is resurrected, he is a changed man that sets about helping, with extraordinary vigour, all the townspeople: “Restored, he’d become a restorer. Repaired and resurrected, it looked as if he’d set about repairing and resurrecting everything in sight” (200). Bourne’s miraculous resurrection has Larry wondering what might happen next in this world seemingly turned upside down: “Who could imagine where all this would end? Would they wake up some day and discover the cemetery turned into a mess of sprung-open graves, a noisy party of dancing revitalized corpses?” (200). Bourne’s resurrection is the beginning of the townspeople’s acceptance of a new and altered reality, opening up their eyes to the potential magic that lay everywhere. Furthermore, once Bourne comes back to life, he also begins to have a positive impact on the lives of the townspeople through the richness of his poetry and the goodness of his action. For example, when Larry gets hold of a book of Bourne’s poetry, he typically interprets the poems to be about sex (this obsession stemming from his own sexual frustration, now heightened by Raimey’s arrival). For the lonely Jenny, the book is about wanting to find a sense of belonging (123). Angela Turner interprets the poems to be about love, “the most beautiful love poems I have ever read” (124), and is grateful she never left Port Annie as she was once tempted to. Charlie Reynolds the newspaper man finds that the poems are about communication (125). Thus Bourne’s poetry, like any good poetry should, is adaptable to each character’s personal interpretation. The universality of his poetry becomes a further extension of Bourne’s extraordinary ability to help each character find their way to that which each desires. Larry and Angela eventually find love in each other when they are both encouraged to be truthful about the mistakes they’ve made (his foolish obsession with Raimey, and her short-lived affair with the Peruvian sailor)—mistakes that are, however, paths to discovering their true nature, their desires, thus opening up the possibility of liberation from their once stagnant lives. What

the narrative seems to want to illustrate is that both of them fall for transient characters that are magically thrown in their way, when true substantial love could be found right there in two ordinary people. As Larry at first jealously thinks, “What he should be doing was helping everyone to see that Joseph Bourne was a man like any other, nothing unnatural about him just because he’d been through an unusual experience. The trouble was that people around here watched him as if they expected him to do something spectacular any minute, like a conjuror or a superman or a risen Christ” (222). It is only when Larry starts accepting Bourne for his immense humanity and stops obsessively trying to discover who he really is, that he is able to learn by example that only by being true to himself he can find real love. As he tells himself when he finally finds the courage to return Angela’s advances, “The truth, Larry, the truth” (256). The truth was not to be found in the supposed pornography of liquor ads, or in changing the style of his clothes to attract Raimey, but in accepting and believing in himself. Larry comes to the realization that heroes were not mythical creatures or great men of history— heroes could be found in the most unlikely mortals such as Bourne:

In Joseph Bourne, Larry thought he could perceive a power force at work – wonderful and terrifying all at once – preparing to slip the world out from under everyone’s feet any minute. Ready to shake their foundations loose and whisk the earth right away. Perhaps only those who had learned to float with their dreams, like Bourne himself, had any hope of surviving. [...] Force of nature, instruments of God, or only a common mortal with accidental talents, [...] Instead of fighting dragons or slaying villains he challenged the limits of mortality. (253)

Significantly, the language used to describe Bourne (“shaking the foundations” and “float”) are indicative of the earthquake and the wave respectively, thus bringing together the two

natural disasters that affect Port Annie—the ability to “float” also points to the fact that these powerful forces can be survived.

Another character that finds salvation and the sense of belonging she so desperately craves is Jenny Chambers, once a well-travelled and celebrated stripper who was at first a big hit in Port Annie, until the inhabitants got used to her and realised she wasn't anything special. Jenny eventually shacks up with the quiet mill-worker Slim Potts and his eight children, settling into a boring lonely existence that leaves her unsatisfied. To break the tedium of her everyday life she tries to instigate superficial changes by buying herself a whole new wardrobe of clothes, and when that fails she decides to get married to Slim in a big wedding that, for a while at least, occupies her time and draws the other women of the town to her side. Like Mayor Weins, Jeremy Fell, and Damon West's artificial attempts to bring about commercial sources of “progress” and change, Jenny's superficial attempts at finding fulfilment and happiness are revealed to be just that—superficial and inadequate. When Bourne's house is burnt down unexpectedly, Jenny invites him to come stay in her house and in just observing him every day she realises the superficiality of her distractions: “he was a constant reminder of how good he was, how selfless, how dedicated to making other people happy. A model of generosity. And here she was, taking advantage of all those women to make herself more popular [...] not having any purpose in her life” (279-280). She comes to the realization that this mere mortal like herself could change so many lives for the better simply by being himself: “He ate, he laughed, he used the toilet just like anybody else, and yet he was still capable of working marvels everywhere he went” (280). By simply leading by example (no great feats of magic needed) Bourne shows her that the way to true happiness was being herself, prophetically suggesting that she make it up to the

disappointed bridesmaids by one day dancing for them (281). Responding to her dismissal of such a shocking idea, he states, “I think you will. Sometimes the only way we grow is by pushing against the limits that try to hold us back. I think some day you’ll dance for them, you’ll make it a gift, the thing you know how to do” (281). After the mudslide, and after Bourne quietly leaves Port Annie, when all the remaining townspeople gather for shelter by the squatters flats that they had all so disapproved of, Jenny does indeed perform a miracle of a dance that not only recalls Raimey’s grace, but allows her to shed the layers of accumulated sorrow: the death of Slim, the closet full of clothes she didn’t need, her years of loneliness, the desperation of her big wedding. As Jenny struggles to shed her sorrows the survivors all feel a sense of unity and belonging (except for Mayor Weins who, “seemed to suspect that something wonderful was happening here, but he had no clear idea what it might be” (340-341)). Larry however felt “their own contributions to the music’s beat, the body movements, the frenzy of her need to free herself from that thing, all of it united them somehow. This old earth could throw you off its back like a bronco any time it wanted, but it couldn’t break that link which ran from soul to soul” (340). As the people watching Jenny’s regenerative dance slowly begin to join her the scene becomes a celebration of survival and a sense of community, the spirit of Raimey the sea-bird, and Bourne the poet can be felt in the exhilarating sense of freedom that is experienced in that euphoric moment. As Larry thinks, “not even the rain could wash the girl [Raimey] away. All of them would be carrying a little of her around for the rest of their lives whether they liked it or not” (329).

The idea of the metamorphosis of the mundane by the infusion of magic and the wisdom of a prophetic poetics is thus central to Hodgins’s narrative. Landscapes are transformed by the merging of the sea and land, first with a tidal wave that transforms the

town into a scene from the bottom of the ocean, then with a landslide that pushes the townspeople to the farthest edge of the inlet by the squatters flats. Characters like Larry Bowman, Angela Turner, and Jenny Chambers rediscover themselves in a town where everyone had escaped to forget past lives. However, before these characters can be resurrected and freed, they first have to go through the experience of death, embodied by the anchoring myth of Fat Annie, to which I now turn.

If Raimey and Bourne are the extraordinary mortals that bring about resurrection, then the magical myth of Fat Annie is ironically not one that instills the town with a sense of progress, precisely because it is not a myth that is open to interpretation: there is only one version of these events, universally accepted by the townspeople. Unlike Bourne's poetry that can be interpreted by each person in a different way and still evoke truth, or Raimey's dispersal of her magic that shows up in the features of some of the other characters, "Fat Annie has always meant the same to everyone. Flesh. Something you could get your hands on, flesh and earth and good old solid matter" (254).

We are told the myth of Fat Annie during a conversation between Christie, Pete, and Rita Rentella, the regulars at the bar of the Kick-and-Kill. Before the town of Port Annie was built, another massive tidal wave had deposited a huge whale, larger than ships, onto the beach. The next day the natives of the land found a huge blue-tinged woman sitting where the whale had been. Before their very eyes, Fat Annie proceeded to gather a bunch of twigs that suddenly transformed into a thin twig-like man, named Dieter Fartenburg, who becomes her husband and lover. Annie is described as an enormous "tub of love" (91), and their amorous love-making is legendary; together they build a successful lumber business. This continues until one day Fat Annie finds a new secret lover, Billy Goat Jake, who lived on

an island off the inlet with his goats, and who confesses to having committed murder. One day, after returning from a visit to Jake, Fat Annie is told that Dieter has gone missing, and a month after his disappearance, Fat Annie rows back to Jake to find he has disappeared as well. In a violent rage, Fat Annie slaughters Jake's goats, in a massacre (Annie herself is injured while trying to kill the billy) that turns the water into a crimson colour (93). It is only after Annie sells the lumber business to the mill and the building of the town begins that workers digging the site of the new hotel (the Kick-and-Kill) discover Dieter's crushed body beneath the roots of a gigantic old tree. Fat Annie gathers the remains of her beloved husband, crushes it into a powder and swallows it all; finally she decides to make her "ascent" (95). She packs up her things and moves into an upstairs room of the hotel, refusing to descend again, "until she damn well felt like it" (95). No one has seen her since except Vincent the barman, who personally delivers her daily meals.

The myth of Fat Annie is shrouded in death and blood, beginning with her affair with a murderer, the death of her husband, and her slaughter of the goats. Many years later, as Christie recounts the myth, a violent fight erupts between him and Pete, who mocks Fat Annie, outraging Christie. The myth of Fat Annie reappears later in the narrative when Mayor Weins along with Damon West decide that, since all his tourist schemes have ended in failure, "he needed to have that old woman come down, [...] and become the visible spirit of the town" (308). The Mayor goes up to her room, and finds an old woman that resembles a "white shrivelled-up parsnip" (309) with a fish tank full of fish skeletons. Fat Annie is so old and decayed that they almost wonder if she is still alive (310). After all this time, the "tub of love" that was so full of passion, energy, and flesh is still surrounded by death, only now it is the death of old age and of a life-time locked away from the rest of the world.

According to Bourne, Fat Annie has dodged him his whole life, writing him “obscene letters” and “invitations to hell” (255). Larry Bowman recounts what Bourne has told him of Fat Annie: “He told me it was only natural the two of them would end up in the same place here. The end of the world, he calls it, he and the old death-whore at the end of the world together, and only one of them—he says—with any hope of surviving” (255). For if Bourne, brought back to life and continuing to live life to the brim by dedicating himself to helping others, is a symbol of life and vitality, Fat Annie—in her self-imposed exile, her determination to “root” herself to the very spot where her husband had died, and her final decaying figure—is the very antithesis of Bourne. It is not surprising, then, that when she is forcefully brought down and dies, as she is flung out of the window in one of the most absurd scenes in the novel, the next morning the town awakens to find that “the world had changed its colour once again” (315), and it is now that the huge mudslide occurs, bringing about the death of the town and its subsequent resurrection. The cataclysmic event also separates those that truly belong to the community from the others. Those people who had hated the town leave in contempt without a backward glance, “more than one family hurrying away said that if they ever saw anyone from Port Annie again it would be far too soon” (322). Those who, such as Slim Potts and Eva McCarthy, are too deeply rooted to their belongings (the former, to his collection of tractors, and the latter, to her house), are trapped and killed by those very objects. The others, Larry and Angela, Jenny and Rita Rentella, and a host of other more redeeming characters, survive and find shelter with the very people they had always disdained, the squatters on the inlet with their barbaric lifestyle. The death of Fat Annie signals the beginnings of a new, more united community that has been brought together in large part by the miracles of Joseph Bourne. Bourne and Raimsey, with their own unique forms of magical-like qualities, awaken these characters from the stupor of their

mundane lives lived beneath the shadows of the myth of Fat Annie. Once the myth is debunked, and she is revealed to be nothing but a shrivelled up old woman subjected to the most absurd of deaths, the earth reasserts its power in a downward movement towards the sea that allows for the “cleansing” and rebirth of the town.

Amidst the powerful, uncontrollable, and mysterious forces of nature embodied by water and earth, we find that the true sources of salvation stem not from over-arching myths of creation, or commodified ideas of “progress”, or any other means of artifice, but from the magical “spirit” of communal humanity—the capacity for self-less love, the struggle for survival and continuity, and individual self-acceptance—these are the universal “truths”, embodied by Bourne, that lead to the salvation of the characters living at the edge of the world. As the Mayor (for his own misguided reasons) concludes, “So Bourne was his salvation. The salvation of the whole town” (103).

And this brings me to a major point in the novel: the contrast between the men who attempt to impose a materialistic and individualistic sense of “progress” on the town (Mayor Weins, Fells, and West) and the therapeutic good deeds of Bourne that instils the townspeople with a newfound sense of community. Writing from the edge of a country, Canada, which feels culturally subjected to U.S. consumerism and power (West is dressed as a cowboy when he addresses the townspeople to inform them of his grand commercial plans), Hodgins seems to be cherishing and even embracing his and his island’s peripheral condition. It could be argued that Hodgins, like Bourne, uses magical realism to show the natural beauty of the topography of Vancouver Island for what it is—one of the remnants of the old frontier, in which people could begin new lives and rediscover themselves. Furthermore, one could argue that in its metaphorical journey up north from South America,

Bourne's adopted version of magical realism acquires the spirit of the legendary American frontier but without embracing its individualism and its violence. As Zamora and Faris write in their introduction to *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, "magical realism, in contrast to the realism upon which it builds, may encode the strengths of communities even more than the struggles of individuals. Societies, rather than personalities, tend to rise and fall in magical realist fiction" (10). The title of this chapter, "New Frontiers" is thus a reference to the new frontier in which magical realism now finds itself (the farthest western edge of Canada), and to the way in which it *adapts* to this new geography, thus signalling a new frontier in the literary mode of magical realism itself.

4.3 Poetry, and other Musings about Representation

Both Martín Gaité's and Allende's novels include discussions about writing. As we saw in chapter two, in *The Back Room*, the narrator and Alejandro explore the nature of the fantastic and the courage it takes to face uncertainty by maintaining the hesitation from beginning to end. In *The House of the Spirits*, re-writing the history of her family and her nation allows Alba to confront the horrors of the ruling Junta as well as find forgiveness for past sins by ending the cycle of revenge and violence. In *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*, the potential of creative writing is once again taken up and explored through Bourne's poetry, universal in the way it can be interpreted differently by each reader according to his or her own perspective (his discussions of it with Larry Bowman brings this meta-literary focus to the foreground), and, in contrast to that, through Mrs. Barnstone's epic poem, which portrays the events of the town as they unfold. The literary discussions that so proliferate in these three texts are one of the ways in which these writers can comment on

and explore further the relationship between fiction and reality, foregrounded in their very use of the mode of the fantastic and magical realism. In juxtaposing the real and the unreal, the mundane and the magical, writers of the fantastic and magical realism seek to open new ways of looking at the world. Their desire to include literary discussions on writing and interpretation can be seen as an extension of that opening up of perspectives—positing questions not just about the complex nature of reality, but also about how to articulate the experience of the multiple realities they present in their works.

Reading Bourne's poetry, Larry is surprised by the poet's ability to bring together seemingly incongruent ideas that lead to the same overall theme: "They all started out talking about something a person could relax about, like a walk through an alder grove, then just when you were nodding yes you knew what he was talking about, he snuck and hit you with something bizarre that went hand in hand with what you'd just agreed to" (121). Bourne's poetry, like magical realism, disrupts the complacency of the reader by interjecting something foreign and bizarre into the known and familiar. "His sole purpose on earth, according to the poem, was to let through a light that shone from somewhere else" (121). The "somewhere else" may be taken as another name for what McHale calls "the world next door," a parallel world hidden behind layers of constructed representations of reality. Instead of resorting to the mysterious or supernatural to convey the sense of underlying truth, *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne* looks for the little miracles that can be performed by a mortal Poet, by the changes that can be "felt" instead of just implied or sensed, as Bourne tells Larry: "The old metaphors for eternity didn't work anymore [...] We know too much for that" (286-287). Bourne comes to the conclusion that in the presence of empty symbols, "eternity can only be expressed by implication, by the way we live our lives" (287).

Again we find that the novel attempts to find truths that are grounded in the realm of the everyday, in things of the earth. There is definitely an “earthiness” to Hodgins’s form of magical realism that, as I argued earlier, is related to the way he grounds his narrative to the topography of Vancouver Island, providing it with its own distinctive “regional” flavour. However, the narrative is not so grounded that it becomes a mere reflection or record of the everyday lives of people living in that area, unlike Mrs. Barnstone’s epic poem, which is “based entirely on the things that had been going on in this town” (282). She senses that an epic battle between the squatters and the contracting company that aims to renovate the area is about to ensue—“a matter of life and death” (283) which it was “her job just to record” (283). She soon realizes, however, that her poem, although it takes into account all the “action” that occurs, is not really reflecting the true battle that was taking place: “the real story was going on behind it somewhere, perhaps invisibly, or just out of range of her vision” (299). Thus, while Bourne’s poetry reflects the world hidden beneath the objects, symbols, and action of everyday life, Mrs. Barnstone’s poetry acts as the very screen obstructing that hidden world from view. So bogged down in the minute recording of the mundane, her poem is unable to represent or reflect on the “magical” happenings—the true death and resurrection—of the town as it undergoes a climactic transformation. “Freed from something—don’t ask him [Larry] what—they’d been given a chance to find out what they were capable of being, a chance they would never have had as long as they’d stayed rooted to that mountain” (328). Mrs. Barnstone’s poetry, “rooted” only within the confines of a concrete reality symbolized by the mountain, is unable to encompass the magical properties that stem from the sea (which brings forth Fat Annie, Raimey the sea-bird, and Bourne the poet) transforming the town into a magical landscape of marine life, and freeing its inhabitants from their stagnant lives. Bourne, as the ultimate symbol of life and the living

embodiment of magical realism, within whom “the marvellous seemed to be perfectly natural” (331), can be seen as an instigating agent of transformation and subsequent freedom in both literature and reality. Like Joseph Bourne himself, the narrative power of *Bourne* as a magical realist text lies in its inclusion of the “other world,” or the “world next door” that breaks down conventional ways of both representing reality and of experiencing that reality. Freeing itself from the “rootedness” of reality and its conventional forms of literary representation by literally and metaphorically living on the edge, it is able to wedge a textual space for itself that encompasses life and death, the magical and the mundane. As Jenny thinks, too exhausted to finish her dance, “it hung in the air unfinished” (342); “After all, as some of them knew, the things that aren’t seen never end” (342). This textual space, then, in its precarious balance on the edge between the miraculous and the mundane, this world and “the world next door”, provides that sense of “eternity”, of infiniteness that Bourne talks about. Thus the magical realist text leaves the reader with a sense of having experienced an alternate reality in which we realise we don’t know “too much”, and in which lie hidden elements of the extraordinary yet to be unearthed. As Lois Parkinson Zamora argues in “Magical Romance/Magical Realism”,

Contemporary magical realist narratives remove the ground upon which the reader of conventional novels and short stories expects to stand—the ground of a fictional world that is stable enough to be knowable. In this way, magical realist texts dramatize the process of knowing (and not knowing): the reader is obliged to wonder how we are to locate the “real” in magical realism. (500)

Like the shifting and shaking land upon which Port Annie stands, the magical realist text is constantly a world in flux, alternating as it does between the real and unreal, between one

world and another, and this is one of the main features of magical realism that generates a new type of hesitation in the reader.

What I hope this chapter has illustrated is magical realism's ability to cross borders, bridge cultures, and, along the way, adapt itself to suit the unique perspectives of authors located in a variety of regions, with different cultural backgrounds and different personal literary agendas—whether in rewriting a repressive history (Martín Gaité), exorcising past personal traumas (Allende), or articulating the experience of living on a relatively new and untamed frontier (Hodgins). In all of these cases, magical realism as an evolved form of the fantastic works as a transformative literary genre that explores not only the relation of literature to reality and vice versa, but also the way constructions of reality (past or present) should be adaptable to change through further inclusivity (of other supernatural realities and/or marginalized writers), revision (in allowing for personal rewritings of history), and de-construction (of constructs of reality, gender, time, and space). In the next and final chapter of this thesis I will look at the theme of the sublime space as it exists in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in Siberia and the Sunderbans respectively.

Chapter 5

The Magical and the Sublime

In the introduction of this study I presented a general sketch of the main theories of the sublime, and in the first chapter I examined how these formulations manifest themselves in Gothic and fantastic narratives. In this final chapter, having now looked at a variety of different fantastic and magical realist texts, I wish to reopen that discussion and explore more specifically the ways in which magical realist texts encounter and engage with themes of the sublime. This chapter will concentrate in particular on key episodes of Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: being lost in Siberia and in the Jungle, respectively. While the entire novels could be examined as examples of magical realist novels, here, for reasons of space and focus, I can only restrict myself to these specific episodes, which occur in spaces that surpass any attempt at representation and that

occupy the no-man's land that lies at the heart of uncertainty—the land in which the borders of the real and the unreal blur to a vanishing point. What I will explore in this chapter, then, is what I want to call the magical sublime: the force of the sublime that stems from what Wendy B. Faris terms the “irreducible element” of magic to be found in magical realist texts. The magical sublime manifested in the sublime spaces of Siberia and the Jungle and the existence of the magical sublime as an underlying force in the text signalled by a group of recurring motifs will be my main focus in the first part of the chapter. Then I will take a step back and return to the fantastic works discussed in earlier chapters, mapping out a network of themes that have, in different ways, appeared in the Gothic, fantastic, and magical realist texts.

As a concluding remark on this study as a whole, I will return to the political dimension of some of the works and its relation to the sublime, focusing in particular on *The Back Room*, *The House of the Spirits*, and *Midnight's Children*—novels that deal with the horrors of living under the shadow of despotic regimes—to consider why their authors make the choice to break through the silence by using the voice(s) of magical realism.

5.1 Spaces of the Sublime: Siberia and the Jungle

In the previous chapter I discussed how the location of Port Annie “at the edge of the world” is directly linked the transformative textual space of magical realism. To extend that discussion I will examine the representation of Siberia in *Nights at the Circus* and of the jungle in *Midnight's Children*—the spaces of the sublime, those remote and primordial settings of origin untouched and uncorrupted by the hands of mankind and our constructions of “reality”.

In his work on the supernatural sublime, Jack G. Voller argues that, in the post-Enlightenment era, increased secularization and urbanization made the individual feel isolated from any transcendent power, either natural or divine. Thus, writers and philosophers such as Wordsworth and Coleridge advocated a return to the restorative settings of nature, as a form of reconnecting with oneself and recovering some form of communion with the larger natural world. After all, in classical formulations, nature is very often the locus of the sublime experience. In a similar manner, the episodes in Siberia and the jungle occur in sublime spaces where the urban metropolises of London and Bombay give way to pre-Adamite worlds in which the magical nature of the texts is intensified and amplified and the sublime distances itself from the Gothic interiority of decaying, labyrinthine estates and disturbed psyches. As postmodern texts, both *Nights at the Circus* and *Midnight's Children* utilize these remote places to explore how time and identity are affected by the sublime. Consistent with what we have seen in previous chapters, magical realism once again uses its transformative imaginative powers by taking the concept of the sublime—an ineffable and unrepresentable source of power—and materializing it in the form of mythical magical beings (the bird-woman Fevvers and the native shaman, Saleem as Buddha) and magical spaces that aggressively tear away at the outer layers of consciousness and identity.

5.1.1 Siberia in *Nights at the Circus*

In *Nights at the Circus*, a novel that takes place in the last year of the nineteenth century, the central character Fevvers is supposedly a magical hybrid creature, part woman and part bird. Raised in the heart of London in a common brothel, she is described in the

coarsest terms as a gigantic woman with an enormous appetite for the materialistic pleasures of life: food and wealth (12). Yoked together in *Fevvers* are the magical and the mundane so characteristic of magical realism. She delights in entrancing her audience, whether it is the sceptical journalist Walser, whom she enthralls with her magical personal history, or her audiences in the circus who come to gaze at her marvellous figure as it flies beneath the big circus tent. She is never above using her magical figure to make money, almost falling prey twice to wealthy men interested in her as a fetish and freakish commodity. She is keen to display herself in all her gaudy glory, dyeing her feathers and hair blonde with peroxide, caking her face with heavy makeup—devices that amplify her beauty and yet draw attention to her as an artifice. Her descriptions serve to heighten the mystery that centres around her: how much of *Fevvers* is real and how much is fake? Walser, as a journalist sent to write about her as a phenomenon, becomes intrigued; wanting to solve this mystery, he joins the circus so as to write a better story about her. The circus, run by a bawdy American entrepreneur called the Colonel who dreams of taking it across the tundra to perform before the Czar of Russia, is made up of strange groups: the tragic clowns led by Buffo (depicted as a Christ-like figure), the Abyssinian “princess” and her musically inclined dancing tigers, and the Ape-man and his extraordinarily human-like monkeys. As the train carrying the circus makes its way across Siberia it is derailed in a huge explosion that leaves many dead, while *Fevvers* and her childhood guardian Lizzie, along with the princess and her singing companion Mignon, are taken in by a band of exiles, and Walser (who loses all memory as a result of the explosion) wanders until he is found by a native shaman.

In *Nights at the Circus*, the upwards movement or resurfacing of the sublime is most evident in the narrative’s move away from the Gothic crypts and corpses, of London’s seedy

and horrific underground world of freakish sexual fetishism, to the vast natural landscape of Siberia and its primitive inhabitants. The prime example of London's dark underworld is Madame Schreck's "museum of woman monsters" (55) which "catered for those who were troubled in their...souls" (57). As Fevvers describes to Walser: "downstairs, in what had used to be the wine cellar, she'd had a sort of vault or crypt instructed, with wormy beams overhead and nasty damp flagstones underfoot, and this place was known as "'Down Below' or else, 'The Abyss'" (61). It is to this horrifying establishment that Fevvers goes to work and live after the brothel in which she was raised is burned down. One of its "woman monsters" is called Sleeping Beauty because of a chronic condition that makes her sleep all day long, only waking to eat a little meal and fill a bedpan before falling asleep again (63). "If you wish to lie down beside the living corpse and hold in your trembling arms the entire mystery of consciousness, that is and is not at the same time, why, that was available cash down" (70). Fevvers admits to Walser that what she "never could get used to was the sight of their eyes, for there was no terror in the house our customers did not bring with them" (62). When one of their most frequent clients, a Mr. Rosencreutz who is interested in the occult, expresses an interest in Fevvers, Madame Schreck sells her to him against her will, and she finds herself in "a mansion in the Gothic style" (74). During the course of their evening together Fevvers begins to realize the man's intention is to gain for himself eternal youth by sacrificing her as an angel of death. At one point, he translates and explains to her the Hindu chant inscribed on a gold medallion he wears constantly around his neck: "the female part, or absence, or atrocious hole, or dreadful chasm, the Abyss, Down Below, the vortex that sucks everything dreadfully down, down, down where Terror rules..." (77). From the horrors of Madame Schreck's museum of women monsters to the Gothic-style mansion of the demented Mr. Rosencreutz, in the urban space of London the terrifying sublime remains

repressed within the dark interior dungeons that so often in the Gothic represented repressed sexual desires/transgressions. As Vijay Mishra argues with regards to women writers of the Gothic sublime: “a female sublime reads the unrepresentable as the horrifying threat of violation” (9). Indeed, in *Nights at the Circus*, the theme of sexual violation and entrapment is everywhere in the text—from Fevvers’s experiences in the seedy underworld of London, to the women trapped in the female prison in Siberia. It is significant that the only product of developed society that exists in Siberia is this horrible correctional institute against which the vast landscape of the surrounding nature is contrasted. Thus, in most of these episodes, the motifs of the sublime are present, signalling either the repressed sublime (as is it exists in London), or the more overt workings of the sublime (as it exists in Siberia).

In the remote landscape of Siberia, however, Fevvers (with the rest of the surviving circus troupe), Walser, and the sublime all experience a transformation. In the final scene before the section on Siberia begins, while the circus is still in St. Petersburg, Fevvers comes under the threat of sexual violation once again at the hands of an eccentric Russian Grand Duke who tries to add her to his strange collection of automated toys. Fevvers manages to escape by distracting the aristocrat as he shows her his collection of miniature eggs, specifically the one in which lays an engine train labelled “*The Trans-Siberian Express*” (191). In an extraordinary moment of magical realism at its best, Fevvers is able to make her escape by using the toy train encased in the miniature egg:

She dropped the toy train on the Isfahan runner – mercifully, it landed on its wheels – as, with a grunt and a whistle of expelled breath, the Grand Duke ejaculated.

In those few seconds of his lapse of consciousness, Fevvers ran helter-skelter down the platform, opened the door of the first-class compartment and clambered aboard. “Look what a

mess he's made of your dress, the pig," said Lizzie. The weeping girl threw herself into the woman's arms. (192)

Once in Siberia, the sublime imagery is suddenly everywhere from the "almost supernatural silence" (198) to the "wilderness as of the pre-Adamite world" (199). For the city-loving Fevvers the vastness of the white landscape is unnerving:

Nothing but streaks of snow standing out unnaturally white against the purple horizon, miles away. We are in the middle of nowhere. 'Nowhere', one of those words, like 'nothing', that opens itself inside you like a void. And were we not progressing through the vastness of nothing to the extremities of nowhere? (198)

The irony of travelling across this "pre-Adamite" world from the comforts of a plush bourgeois first-class cabin is not lost on the perceptive Fevvers: "We have no right to be here, in all this *gemütlich* comfort, stuck on our fat bums down this straight track from which we never deviate, like tightrope walkers in a dream traversing an unacknowledged abyss in five star comfort, through the deep core of winter and this inimical terrain" (199). The ironic movement of the train (a symbol of modern technology) as it speeds forward through this primordial world can be seen as the literalized return of the characters to a world of innocence, the untouched and uncorrupted landscape of a vast and remote nature. In "Return of the Century: Time, Modernity, and the End of History in Angela Carter's 'Nights at the Circus'", Rachel Carroll argues that "The technology of the train is intent on a rapid departure from organic means of transport. The return which is witnessed, however, is perhaps not so much as a return *to* the natural world as a return *of* the natural world repressed by the mastery of science" (189-190). If the purpose of Gothic writers was, as Voller states, "to assess the legitimacy of the transcendent imagination in the face of increasing cultural uncertainty and anxiety" (32)—an anxiety that comes in the forms of

corpses and monsters and is repressed within the dark interiors of crypts—then Fevvers’s multiple escapes from the Grand Duke’s castle, and earlier from Madame Schrecks’s museum of monsters and the “Gothic-style” mansion of Mr. Rosencreutz, can be argued to parallel the sublime’s escape from the horrors of Gothic tropes to the imaginative freedoms of a magical realist landscape of nature. The sublime itself—in escaping its Gothic past, and rising to the surface of the text—thus enacts its own literal version of the return of the repressed.

Within the magical realist landscape of Siberia (and indeed the magic in *Nights at the Circus* does intensify during the Siberian episode) the sublime becomes less a negative charge and more a positive force of individual freedom and transformation. There are several examples of what I will henceforth call the “magical sublime” (to distinguish it from Gothic or fantastic versions) that take place in the novel’s Siberian location.

The magical sublime literally explodes onto the scene with a “thunderous boom” (204), abruptly disrupting the narrative as it chugs along within the comforts of the bourgeois interiors of the Trans-Siberia Express. Gazing at the wreckage before her in which broken mirrors seemed to have taken in the tigers, Fevvers says:

I beheld a great wonder. For the tigers were all gone into the mirrors. [...] Only pile upon pile of broken shards of mirror, that segmented the blazing night around us in a thousand jagged associations so you might think, [...] all would be as it had been before, the forest, the plain, the twin tracks of the railway lines bearing forwards towards the infinity of the horizon the pretty little carriages and the puffing train which now seemed to me to have been a kind of gauntlet flung down in the face of Nature – a grand gesture of defiance which Nature had picked up, then tossed disdainfully back up the heaving earth, shattering it into fragments. (205-206)

The entire passage is the perfect depiction of the magical sublime of nature as it destructively begins tearing away at the bourgeois constructions of the train, punishing the tigers for their “unnatural dancing” (206). The shards of mirrors reflect back to Fevvers the destructive and powerful force of the magical sublime, revealing only the fragments of what was once symbolic of the thrust forward into the future of the twentieth century which is just about to begin. As Carroll argues, “As the dawning of the new century approaches, the narrative plunges off the edge of the known world. As the railway carriages of the Trans-Siberian Express, by which the circus is travelling, are thrown from their tracks, a narrative launched by the irrepressible momentum of Fevvers’s rhetoric is seemingly derailed, its trajectory into the future arrested in the suspended temporality of a state of nature” (189). The shattered mirrors reflect back the shattering of consciousness, of bourgeois reality, and of the narrative’s thrust into the future. Suddenly, that progression is halted as time is temporarily suspended by the force of the magical sublime.

The magical sublime works its transformative yet painful magic on the characters of the novel. What marks the episode of Siberia as a sublime space are two aspects: firstly, in the depictions of the landscape that suggest the sense of *boundlessness* and of the “infinite” (205), a space, as we have seen in the passages quoted above, of “nowhere” and of the “abyss” (198-199). Thus, the sublime arises out of the magnitude and vastness of the landscapes. Secondly, the *process* of transformation instigated and carried out by the magical sublime also parallels the classic formulations of the processes of the sublime—the temporary suspension of time, in which the “motions of the soul” are frozen in confrontation with the Other (the magical elements as embodied by the alien and hostile landscape, and the subsequent fear of loss of self and/or death), and the final

transformation of the characters. As I will explain shortly, transformation is what happens in the magical sublime, whereas the classical sublime aimed at transcendence.

As a result of the train crash, Walser loses his memory: “Like the landscape, he was a perfect blank” (222). He is only able to make the most primitive gestures (rubbing his belly to indicate hunger (223)) and crow like a rooster (224) (his last performance with the clowns had him play the role of a rooster). Lured by the sounds of a drum, he comes across a shaman:

The empty centre of an empty horizon, Walser flutters across the snowy wastes. He is a sentient being, still, but no longer a rational one; indeed, now he is all sensibility, without a grain of sense; and sense impressions alone have the power to shock and to ravish him. In his elevated state, he harkens to the rhythm of the drums. (236)

Stripped of his sceptical super-ego, the infant Walser is taken in by the shaman and soon becomes his prodigy. The shaman himself is described as a sort of mystic scientist who interprets “the visible world about him via the information he acquired through dreaming” (253). As Walser slowly recovers fragments of his past life through hallucinogenic-induced dreams and tries to communicate them to the shaman, the mystic is intrigued because it

Dissolved the slender margin the Shaman apprehended between real and unreal, although the Shaman himself would not have put it that way since he noticed only the margin, shallow as a step, between one level of reality and another. He made no categorical distinction between seeing and believing. It could be said that, for all the people of this region, there existed no difference between fact and fiction; instead, a sort of magical realism. (260)

The inhabitants of this magically sublime space are thus shaped by a landscape in which the “real” world is composed of both the magical elements of a dreamt reality and the concrete natural environment of the tundra. In Siberia, the boundaries between the empirical

post-Enlightenment world and the magical cease to exist, so that the text comes to inhabit an actual world of (explicitly named) magical realism.

Fevvers and the rest of the remaining survivors of the circus likewise come in contact with the magical force of the surrounding nature. In one pivotal scene, when Mignon begins to sing, we find the magical sublime as a positive force of rejuvenation and transformation stirring the silence of the surrounding nature and its inhabitants: “Under that unseasonable sun, or under the influence of the voice and the piano, all the wilderness was stirring as if with new life. [...] And a distant crack or two, as if the ice had broken up in ecstasy” (250). The music as a powerful agent of the sublime stirs the wilderness to life, cracking the surface of the vast ice to reveal the “ecstasy” of rejuvenation, of new life, and of the transformative abilities of the magical sublime. As Fevvers describes it,

Mignon’s song is *not* a sad song, not poignant, not a plea. There is a grandeur about her questioning. She does not ask you if you know that land of which she sings because she herself is uncertain it exists—she knows, oh! How well she knows it lies somewhere, elsewhere, beyond the absence of flowers. (249)

As I stated earlier, the sublime in magical texts is transformative rather than seeking the transcendence of classical formulations, which is usually illustrated as a yearning for a lost meaning, for a return to the whole, as if the absence at the heart of the sublime could somehow be bridged by a recovered transcendental meaning. In the postmodern magical sublime, the desire for the recovery of that which has been lost (i.e. self, meaning, the connection to a divine power) is replaced by the desire to seek new meanings, and new ways of experiencing life. Like Mignon’s song, the magical sublime is not a sad song, a plea, or a yearning, but a questioning of the various states of consciousness that can be revealed

when what constitutes “reality” is opened up to a host of new alternative possibilities. As Walser hears Mignon’s music, it stirs within him memories of a not-too-distant past in which he had dreamt of Fevvers’s love, “And then the radiant shadow of the implausible cast its transforming spell across the morning. Out of nowhere, or out of the pale blue sky, or else issuing from the cool heart of the white, fragile sun, there came a voice raised in song [...] All of revivification, all of renewal was promised by that voice” (268).

Fevvers herself is slowly stripped away of her carefully constructed artifice as she begins to lose her peroxide blonde hair, her dyed feathers returning to their natural brown colour. Lost in the wilderness which “acted like a moral magnifying glass, exaggerating the blemishes of some and bringing out the finer points in those whom we thought had none” (279), she loses her former materialistic concerns for wealth and fame, and is preoccupied only with finding the man with whom she realises she is in love with, Jack Walser. In the final scene in which they are finally united, Fevvers experiences her own sublime moment when confronted by Walser’s gaze: “She felt her outlines waver; she felt herself trapped forever in the reflection of Walser’s eyes. For one moment, just one moment, Fevvers suffered the worst crisis of her life: ‘Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?’” (290). Instructed by Lizzie to finally reveal her feathers, Fevvers momentarily feels like a freak with her broken wing and her natural brown feathers, but beneath the awe-struck gaze of the gathering audience of native tribesmen with whom Walser has lived, she realises who she is and accepts Walser’s love.

The magical sublime as it exists in Siberia is mainly a force that stems from the magical landscape of the tundra, a sublime space in which time is temporarily suspended as the characters experience a loss of self in the face of the overwhelming experience of this

vast untamed nature. The sublime music of Mignon that interrupts this frozen moment of suspended time begins to stir the world back to life, until the transformation that is instigated by the exploding train (the shattering of consciousness) culminates in the freeing discoveries of love and magic (Fevvers is indeed a hybrid bird-woman). The scene with Mignon's song, like Jenny's final dance in *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*, are both sublime experiences that mark the transformation that occurs to the characters in each novel, bringing them together in a moment of shared communion with each other and with their surroundings.

5.1.2 The Jungle in *Midnight's Children*

The chapter entitled "In the Sunderbans", takes place in a pivotal moment during the narrative. It occurs in the aftermath of the bombing of Pakistan in 1965 during the India–Pakistan war, where Saleem and his whole family have relocated after leaving Bombay. One of the three bombs that explode in the city of Rawalpindi kills Saleem's entire immediate family, except his sister Jamila (who is away at the time). Saleem is indirectly hit by another bomb while on his way home, and which leaves him with full memory loss. Whether what Saleem narrates is a truthful account of what actually occurred historically, however, is thrown into doubt by his retelling of it: "Aircraft, real or fictional, dropped actual or mythical bombs" (341). In an effort to distance herself from him forever, Jamila has Saleem conscripted into the Pakistani army where his large nose and incredible (magical) sense of smell makes him a human dog-scout. As a result of his memory loss and his reluctance to talk, he is ironically nicknamed the Buddha. Although the episode in the jungle is just one chapter in *Midnight's Children* (by comparison, the section on Siberia in *Nights at*

the Circus extends to the entire second half of the novel), it is a key one, and worthy of detailed attention for what it reveals to us about the magical sublime.

In the immediately preceding chapter, Saleem leads his three comrades, Ayooba, Farooq, and Shaheed, further and further south, “as though some invisible force were directing their footsteps, drawing them into a darker heart of madness, their missions send them south south south, always nearer to the sea, to the mouths of the Ganges and the sea” (358). This is a clear reference to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and in particular to the end where the river Congo is described as “the tranquil waterway leading to the utmost ends of the earth [..., and] seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness” (96). A significant parallel is being drawn here between the river Ganges, the Congo, and the Thames, between the Sunderbans and the jungle of the Congo, thus showing how the long and bloody conflict between India and Pakistan is a direct result of the mess left behind by colonialism.

On the morning just before they finally enter the jungle, his comrades awaken to find the Buddha being chased by a peasant farmer who has just caught him sleeping with his wife—“a gesticulating peasant with a scythe, Father Time enraged” (359). Ayooba is forced to shoot him to save the Buddha, “And Time lies dead in a rice-paddy” (359). Thus, the magical sublime of the jungle signals its approach by the sudden suspension (and in this case, literal death) of time:

They have murdered the hours and forgotten the date, they no longer know if they are chasing after or running from, but whichever it is that pushes them is bringing them closer to the impossible green wall [...] and then they are inside it, the jungle which is so thick that history has hardly ever found the way in. The Sunderbans: it swallows them up. (359)

The unseen force of the magical sublime drives the three soldiers closer and closer to the impossible green wall—a metaphor for the crossing of boundaries from the concreteness of the everyday world to the magical fluid world of the jungle—into a sublime space that will corrosively drive the four men to the point of exhaustion and madness.

The imagery and language used to depict the experience of the jungle everywhere evokes the sublime, and often the Gothic: “the jungle closed behind them like a tomb” (360); “it seems the possibility of ever leaving this place receded before them like the lantern of a ghost” (360). In the terrifying nature of the jungle Saleem does find himself not in a haven from which he can escape the realities of his life but in an extreme anti-reality, a magical nightmare that threatens to annihilate whatever is left of him. As he explains to Padma, “an overdose of reality gave birth to a miasmic longing for flight into the safety of dreams...But the jungle, like all refuges, was entirely other—was both less and more—than he had expected” (360). This aspect of the jungle is sublime in its intimations of boundlessness and infinity, and these intimations are never fully realised because of the inadequacy of the subject’s mind. The jungle for Saleem is both *more* in its literalization of the idea of a space of imaginative excess (where he is able to experience extreme states of mind), and yet *less*, in that it isn’t able to offer him a means of escaping his past (i.e. the death of his family, his love for his sister). When he is bitten by a venomous snake, Saleem deliriously begins to recall his repressed incestuous love for his sister Jamila: “it becomes clear that he is struggling to recall something in particular, something which refuses to return, which obstinately eludes him, so that he gets to the end without finding it” (365). The jungle, like Siberia, causes its victims to regress into a repressed past, and as in Carter’s novel, the experience is a transformative one rather than one that grants transcendence.

All four soldiers are driven to the brink of madness. When they drink the water that falls off the dense foliage of the trees from the incessant rain, “it acquired on its journey something of the insanity of the jungle, so that as they drank they fell deeper and deeper into the thralldom of that livid green world where the birds had voices like creaking wood and all the snakes were blind” (362). The soldiers find themselves quickly regressing into infancy (363), but as the visions of past ancestors and of the ghosts of the people they killed during the war begins to haunt them, a new sense of responsibility begins to overtake this regression: “So it seemed that the magical jungle, having tormented them with their misdeeds, was leading them towards a new adulthood” (364). As the soldiers move further and further into the “dense uncertainty of the jungle” (365) their new sense of responsibility makes them vulnerable to the haunting voices of their victims as it echoes from the trees. Their sense of shame is so great that they begin to stuff their ears with mud to block out the voices of the jungle, so that “although they were spared the singsong accusations of the jungle, they were now obliged to converse in a rudimentary form of sign-language” (363): as in other examples of the eruption of the sublime, the text (like the character’s psyche) is pushed to crisis-point, and language breaks down. Under the strain of the excesses of the magical sublime, from the incessant rain to the poisoned water and the haunting spectres, the soldiers fall prey to their guilt and shame and are driven to the point of madness (365). Having pushed them to the brinks of despair, however, the magical sublime of the jungle does have the positive effect of reawakening their human consciousness. Having killed Father Time, they find themselves trapped in the maddening limbo of the jungle—“None of them knew how long this period lasted, because in the Sunderbans time followed unknown laws” (367)—yet they find the way back to themselves, to who they were before they became murdering soldiers in the Holy war, as a huge tidal wave finally pushes them out of

the jungle: “it seemed as if the jungle, having tired of its playthings, were ejecting them unceremoniously from its territory” (368). As in *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*, the tidal wave is a source of cleansing and renovation for the people of Port Annie. Like Siberia, the jungle becomes a literal manifestation of the sublime, taking on a life-like monstrous animation, preying on its victims with a force that at first inflicts pain (by stripping away the layers of outer consciousness) and then pleasure (in allowing the characters to regain access to various sublimated aspects of their selves) by transforming them. In *Nights at the Circus*, Walsler the sceptic is finally able to believe the magical identity of the woman he loves; Fevvers leaves behind her former materialistic concerns and accepts Walsler’s love. In *Midnight’s Children*, Saleem and his comrades rediscover their humanity after experiencing the terrible haunting of the jungle, just as some of the citizens of Port Annie find love and a sense of community after the mudslide. In the magical realist landscape, the magical sublime proves to be a positive force of rejuvenation and ultimate transformation, while still utilizing many of the recurring motifs of the Gothic and fantastic sublime.

5.2 Signalling the Sublime: Recurring Motifs of the Sublime

I will now take a step back and re-examine some of the texts previously discussed to consider how the sublime manifests itself in them. In all of the Gothic, fantastic, and magical realist narratives presented in this study, a group of recurring motifs related to the effect of the sublime manifest themselves literally and/or metaphorically: the focalized gaze, fissures and/or fragmentation, disintegration and decay, and muteness or silence.

By focalized gaze I refer to those elements that seem to be pointing at *something*, from the pointed stares of ghosts to pointing fingers in paintings. We first come across an example of the focalized gaze in the ghosts of *The Turn of the Screw* who “stare” (16), their eyes “markedly fixed” (17) on the Governess. In *The Back Room* a reference is made to a print of a Faustian figure, “the index finger of his other hand pointing toward the second figure in the print” (10)—the second figure being none other than the devil. Later on in *The Back Room*, the narrator comes across a note to herself which reads, “Fantastic novel. Remember the print of Luther and the Devil. Similar atmosphere”; the narrator looks at the shelf by which the print had previously been hanging, but she finds it gone (143). Significantly, immediately after the narrator realizes that the print has gone missing, she receives the mysterious call from a female stranger who is looking for Alejandro. As we saw in chapter two, this surreal phone call further adds to the mystery and ambiguity of the whole narrative by suggesting that Alejandro might be an old lover of the narrator’s. It opens up the possibility of interpreting the appearance of Alejandro in a more natural way—that he is just an old acquaintance from her past come to meet her, or to discuss her literary work. This particular example of the motif of the focalized gaze thus signals two possible interpretations—the two possible levels of reality—on which this fantastic text hinges: an uncanny/real interpretation (Alejandro is an old acquaintance) or a marvellous/unreal one (Alejandro is the devil). The suspension of time is another indicator that a sublime force is at work during the novel: the narrator herself asks just before she notices the print has gone missing, “How long ago was it that I was last lay stretched out on this bed?” (143). The night-long discussion with Alejandro is itself a sublime experience in which the narrator first experiences repulsion (at being disturbed by this sinister stranger’s unannounced arrival and probing questions) then attraction (she begins to enjoy her

discussion with Alejandro) and then, finally, transcendence when the fantastic novel she always intended to write magically appears as a full manuscript. The whole fantastic narrative is thus wholly engulfed in a sublime moment in which time is suspended, and the narrator's mind experiences the expansion of thought that allows her to go back in time and traverse the trajectory of all that has led up to it. Yet, her complete understanding or apprehension of this moment is stopped short by the uncertainty of the experience. The overall structure of the novel thus mimics the experience/process of the sublime: the initial confrontation with the sublime image/figure (in this case, Alejandro), the individual's mind temporarily arrested by the mysterious appearance of this image, the fear and then pleasure, suspended time, and then transcendence (the novel magically appears).

The recurring motif of the focalized gaze and the suspension of time thus signal the underlying force of the sublime that stems from the supernatural/unreal/magical moment that exists in a fantastic work. That is not to say that every fantastical element necessarily must trigger the sublime, but that in instances when the fantastical/supernatural/magical does instigate the force of the sublime, it is accompanied by certain signifying features and motifs that point to the sublime at play. This is the case also in the other novels I have discussed. In *The House of the Spirits*, the nine-year old Clara "peered through the crack" (54), watching the doctor and his assistant as they perform a grisly autopsy on her sister Rosa—a horrifying experience that induces her to a muteness that would last for nine years. In *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*, the appearance of the sublimely beautiful Raimey causes all the men to stop in their tracks and stare admiringly at her figure as she walks through the town in search of Bourne. The motif of the focalized gaze occurs likewise in *Nights at the Circus* and *Midnight's Children*. In the chapter in Siberia, there is an entire

episode that depicts a remote women's prison run by a demented woman who attempts to find self-redemption and redemption for her prisoners by staring them into repentance:

"The Countess intended to look at them until they repented" (212). Even when the Countess must sleep she does so by tricking her prisoners:

She drew Venetian blinds down on her windows and left lights burning so her prisoners could not tell if indeed she slept or was only pretending to do so, because sometimes she would draw the blinds when she was *not* asleep in order to demonstrate that she could escape from the tyranny of their eyes any time she chose though they were never free of hers. (214)

Trapped beneath the tyranny of the Countess's gaze, the female inmates are forced into absolute silence for years to meditate on their crimes, with only a large clock with which to count the passing of time.

Finally, reminding us of the print in *The Back Room*, in *Midnight's Children* too there lies above baby Saleem's crib a painting of a fisherman and his pointing finger (122). As Saleem narrates,

In a picture hanging on a bedroom wall, I [...] followed a fisherman's pointing finger with my eyes; eyes straining at the horizon, beyond which lay—what?—my future, perhaps; my special doom, of which I was aware from the beginning, as a shimmering grey presence in that sky-blue room, indistinct at first, but impossible to ignore...because the finger pointed even further than that shimmering horizon [...] driving my eyes towards another frame in which my inescapable destiny hung, forever fixed under glass. (122)

Saleem's destiny is to have his life *watched* by the whole of India, as Nehru writes to him on the celebration of his birth: "We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, a mirror of our own" (122), a statement that cements Saleem's belief that together with his timely birth at the exact hour of India's independence from British

rule, his destiny has inevitably been “handcuffed to history” (9). Further on, Saleem suggests another more sinister interpretation of the fisherman’s pointing finger: “Or maybe [...] it was a finger of warning, its purpose to draw attention to *itself*” (123). But this double-coded finger may be pointing not to *his* destiny, but to that of another child of that fateful Midnight, the destructive Shiva—the true child of Saleem’s parents and with whom he is switched at birth as a revolutionary gesture by his nurse Mary Pereira, who thereby condemns the child born to prosperity to poverty and vice versa (117). The figure of the pointing finger thus becomes a central motif to this narrative of dualities, of “Alpha and Omega” (123), of Saleem and Shiva, of Hindus and Muslims, and of a plethora of other infinite alternatives that represent the teeming multitudes that make up India.

Another version of the recurring motif of the focalized gaze that can be found in *Midnight’s Children* is that of the “perforated sheet” with which Saleem’s grandfather, Dr. Aadam Aziz, is allowed to inspect his future wife’s various fake illnesses and to which he falls prey by falling in love with her, and eventually marrying her. The perforated sheet foreshadows the way that Saleem’s mother Naseem makes herself fall in love with her husband piece-by-piece, and the way that Saleem is inevitably condemned to a life of fragments: “the ghostly essence of that perforated sheet, which doomed my mother to learn to love a man in segments, and which condemned me to see my own life—its meanings, its structures—in fragments also” (107). Both the fisherman’s pointing finger and the perforated sheet, however, provide uncertain focal points. Saleem and the reader are never sure of what exactly the fisherman’s finger is pointing at, or how the perforated sheet comes to be such a powerful force over both his mother and his own destiny. It is important to note however that, although the perforated sheet is analogous to the focalized gaze in the

way it forces a narrowed, pointed vision through the holes, in yet another example of duality, the two motifs are actually opposites. Where the fisherman's pointing finger points to the open view beyond the window (where the ocean lies) thus suggesting the infinite expanse of the horizon, the perforated sheet only offers a limited, fragmented vision of a whole.

The motif of the focalized gaze is one of the ways these texts point to the workings of the sublime as it occurs within the "irreducible element of magic" and the sense of uncertainty that exists within them. As Voller states, "The sublime as both construct and process is dialectically engaged with itself. If in its essential moment it gestures at transcendent liberation, it is also never able to evade its own necessary acknowledgement of human limitation and inadequacy, a confirmation of the inevitability of subjection" (13). I would argue that, likewise, the focalized gaze is a literal manifestation of the double-coded gesture of the sublime as it signals both its existence within the text as a construct, and its unrepresentable nature as a process or experience for which the medium of language remains inadequate. The writers of these fantastic and magical realist texts can only provide the magical literalized metaphors and motifs with which to signal the workings of the sublime, while also acknowledging that the sublime can only be approached via this type of indirect representation.

The motifs of fissures and/or fragmentation and disintegration and/or decay can be grouped together because they all similarly signal gaps in language—the point at which language breaks down under the pressures of the sublime. As I illustrated in the first chapter, we encounter this particular cluster of motifs in "The Fall of the House of Usher" as the actual house threatens to crack and collapse onto itself (and inevitably does). These

motifs recur in *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*, where Port Annie, located “at the edge of the world”, lies precariously at the mercy of a topography that, evoking Kant’s dynamic sublime (90), continually threatens to plunge the townspeople into the sea, or bury them by land (as it inevitably does when the massive mudslide occurs at the end of the novel). In *The House of the Spirits* the theme of fissures as a manifestation of the dynamic sublime can be seen in the terrible earthquakes and volcanoes that devastate Chile, forcing the absent-minded and spiritual Clara to face the physical realities of a natural disaster: “Within a few hours, the earthquake had brought her face to face with violence, death, and vulgarity and had put her in touch with the basic needs to which she had been oblivious” (194). As we saw in the discussion of Hodgins’s novel, it is the death of the mythical Fat Annie that triggers the trembling of the earth: “The air vibrated: a low rumble, a threatening growl [...] the sliced-off piece of mountain collapsed on itself and disintegrated, trees disappearing in mud while others leapt up spinning in the air. Below it the hillside seemed to buckle, heave, roll in waves, its birches whipping from one side to the other” (314-315). In both cases, the physical fissures of the earth point to the classical sublime notion of nature as *might*, as a dynamic force over which we have no control. Despite the perceived superiority of mankind, these texts show us that we are still very much at the mercy of the forces of the natural sublime. This is, moreover, one of the dominant ways in which writers illustrate that what is conceived of as “reality” is still capable of displaying within itself an organic magic that stems from an earth that we can barely understand and that we cannot control.

In *Nights at the Circus* the motif of disintegration and decay echoes recurring tropes of the Gothic. After the death of Madame Nelson (the owner of the brothel in which Fevers is raised), when the prostitutes for the first time open the windows of the house to

let the light of day shine in, its terrible state of decay is finally revealed. As Fevver's tells Walsler, "the moth had nibbled the upholstery, the mice had gnawed away the Persian carpets and dust caked all the cornices. The luxury of the place had been nothing but illusion, created by the candles of midnight, and, in the dawn, all was sere, worn-out decay" (49). The Gothic sublime motif of the decaying estate is brought from the remote places in which it traditionally exists to the very heart of cosmopolitan London. Thus, we find in the postmodernist magical realist text an integration of the sublime into the urban sphere.

In *Midnight's Children* we find the motifs of fissures, disintegration, and decay everywhere as Saleem struggles to finish the story of his life (as a mirror of the story of India's independence) before his body is finally obliterated by the ever widening cracks of his body: "Although now, as the pouring-out of what-was-inside-me nears an end; as cracks widen within—I can hear and feel the rip tear crunch—[...]; there isn't much of me left, and soon there will be nothing at all. Six hundred million specks of dust, and all transparent, invisible as glass..." (383). Like Usher, Saleem is slowly succumbing to the pressures of an invisible force that will inevitably lead to his death. The fissures point to the corrosive effects of the sublime on language under the force of its unrepresentability. Both Usher and Saleem, in facing their own respective horrors (their destruction—Usher by the evil forces of his familial estate, and Saleem by India's destructive politics and its warring factions of Hindus and Muslims), fall victims to their own inadequacies in the face of the horrors of the sublime. The fissures and cracks that so proliferate in Gothic, fantastic, and magical realist texts are the sublime's way of indicating those gaps in language that cannot encompass or articulate the *whole* of the sublime. These motifs can only gesture towards it, and can be

seen as symptomatic of the malaise of the sublime that—in the case of Usher and Saleem at least—offer no moral solace, only disintegration and death. At one point Saleem declares,

I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come [...] to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world. (383)

His grandiose declaration can be seen as an attempt at gathering together the disparate multitudes that make up India, an attempt at achieving some kind of transcendental unity which however continually threatens to fall apart like his own disintegrating body. Eugenia DeLamotte's words, quoted by Voller, are relevant to magical realist texts such as *Midnight's Children*, even though they originally refer to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts:

“The Gothic focus on evil balances the impulse toward transcendence with suspicion.

Perhaps unity with the Other is not something to seek but something to shrink from. Gothic works and Romantic works that use the Gothic tradition are filled with symbols of this ambivalent and frustrated impulse towards transcendent unity”.¹⁸ In the subversive form of the fantastic (be it Gothic or magical realist) the sublime is shown to be not an experience that brings about unity or a sense of wholeness, but a force that strips away any illusions of a whole and coherent reality. We are left with only a fragmented (albeit magical) reality. In this respect, the sublime is shown to be a destructive force. In other instances, as we saw in the previous section, the sublime can lead to a positive sense of transformation, achieved however only after having painfully stripped away the outer layers of consciousness. As Kant stated,

¹⁸Eugenia C. DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (New York: Oxford UP, 1990) 134.

The feeling of the sublime is a pleasure that only arises indirectly, being brought about by the feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful, [...] and, since, the mind is not simply attracted by the object, but is also alternately repelled thereby, the delight in the sublime does not so much involve positive pleasure as admiration or respect, i.e. merits the name of a negative pleasure. (75-76)

Even in the magical sublime analysed above, any pleasure, transcendence or transformation is always tempered by initial pain.

The final motif I want to explore is that of muteness and silence, a motif that occurs often during the sublime moments (specifically after encounters with the supernatural/magical, or within sublime spaces in nature) in the Gothic, fantastic, and magical realist texts studied here. In “The Fall of the House of Usher” the terrible effects of the house have a “silent, yet importunate and terrible influence” (94) on Usher. In the concluding paragraphs, as the house begins to disintegrate and Usher is certain that the noises he hears are those of his deceased sister Madeline, he becomes convinced that he has mistakenly buried her alive and repeatedly and hysterically screams, “I dared not – I *dared* not speak!” (100). When the house finally collapses over its descendants, it falls “silently over the fragments of ‘The House of Usher’” (101). In *The Back Room*, after Alejandro questions the narrator’s lack of courage in daring to face up to uncertainty by writing a fantastic text, there is “a silence, too prolonged a one” (51), during which the narrator has a vision of an imaginary castle growing before her that is made up of papers and her own words (51).

However, nowhere is the theme more evident than in Allende’s *The House of the Spirits*, where Clara is induced into a muteness that lasts nine years due to the horror of witnessing her sister’s autopsy, while Esteban García falls into dumbfounded silence in the

face of Rosa's "awesome beauty": when Clara is heavily pregnant with her twins she "entered one of long periods of silence" and "walked around like a silent overweight shadow" (136). Later on, when Blanca is married to Jean de Satigny and stuck in the dreadful house in which she hears the spirits of the mummies, she finds that "Reality seemed blurred to her, as if the same implacable sun that erased all colours had also deformed the world around her, transforming even people into silent shadows" (291). Finally, after her release from the concentration camp, Alba returns to read her grandmother's diary "in the solitude of the empty house and the silence of the dead and disappeared" (339), to reconstruct the family's story that forms the narrative of *The House of the Spirits*.

What we find from this quick trajectory through the novels is that the motif of silence/muteness is often a result of an encounter with some form or figure of the sublime (terror, ghosts, awesome beauty in nature or a woman, or death), and evokes a sense of absence (empty space, shadows, solitude, the "dead and disappeared"). As Voller explains referring to Richard Payne Knight's *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (1805), "Sublimity, for Knight, is induced by an absence that shapes the affective implications of natural phenomena. The mind's failure to apprehend these phenomena is due to the 'negative existence' that defines such powerful agents of sublimity as 'darkness, vacuity, [and] silence'" (10).¹⁹ Voller adds that Knight uncovered a fundamental absence in the experience (10).²⁰ Muteness or speechlessness is thus not only symptomatic of the initial encounter with the sublime, but also marks another consequence of the sublime: the imagination's drive to excess. As Kant said, "The point of excess for the imagination

¹⁹Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (Westmead, England: Gregg, 1979) 369-70.

²⁰*Ibid.*

(towards which it is driven in the apprehension of the tuition) is like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself” (88). For Kant, the demands of the sublime on the faculties of imagination elicit a negative pleasure, respect or reverence (86). As Mishra explains, “This reverence arises from a failure to grasp what reason has established as law, that is, the transformation into an absolute whole. Reason must totalize; the sublime gestures towards the unattainable” (33). Fantastic and magical realist texts, in their inherent defiance of reason and its impulse towards totalization, use the various motifs of the sublime to gesture towards that unattainability. It is thus to this unattainability—presented as absence or as the abyss of the unknowable—that all the fingers point, drawing towards it the focalized gazes so prevalent in Gothic, fantastic, and magical realist texts. It is under the strain of the struggle that occurs during the sublime moment (between the inadequacy of reason to comprehend and the imagination’s attempts to bridge that inadequacy through representation) that the texts form fissures and cracks that threaten to reveal the void and the abyss that lie beneath the literalized metaphors and the motifs, signalling the workings of the sublime.

5.3 The Sublime Terror

In this last section, I want to consider the reasons why magical realist writers such as Allende and Rushdie choose to depict the terrifying experiences of living under despotic regimes by using the language of magical realism. In chapter three, I touched on the political terrors that result in the silencing of the spirits in Allende’s work. Using that as my starting point, I would like to return to the idea of terror that is so central to classic formulations of the Burkean sublime. If the Burkean sublime is related to that which is

“analogous to terror”, then there must be a link between the political terror that is depicted in Allende’s Chile and in Rushdie’s India under the government of “the Widow” (Indira Gandhi) and to a lesser degree Spain under Franco, and why these terrors are explored through the use of magic.

In the final chapters of *Midnight’s Children*, Saleem’s son is born (like his father) at the exact stroke midnight of the beginning of the Emergency period imposed by Indira Gandhi’s government:

at exactly the same moment the word Emergency was being heard for the first time, and suspension-of-civil rights, and censorship-of-the-press, and armoured-units-on-special-alert, and arrest-of-subversive-elements; something was ending, something was being born, and at the precise instant of the birth of the new India and the beginning of a continuous midnight that would last two years, my son, the child of the renewed ticktock, came out into the world. (419)

It is significant that Saleem’s son, whose real father is Shiva (a figure of evil), whose mother is Parvati the witch (symbolic of magic), and whose destiny seems to have been yoked to this repressive era of the new India, is a mute-child with massive ears. He is, as Saleem narrates, “a child who heard too much, and as a result never spoke [...] I have never heard him utter a single word” (420). Thus, once again, the theme of silence penetrates the sections in the narrative that deal with times of rampant political oppression and persecution. Over a 21-month period from 1975 to 1977, Indira Gandhi was granted by presidential decree the right to rule unilaterally. She suspended elections, curbed civil liberties, and systematically set about persecuting members of the opposition by imprisoning them.

When the police raid the magician’s ghetto in which Saleem has been living with Parvati, he is taken into custody and tortured until he reveals all the names of the magical

children of midnight. The children that are still alive are captured and brought to the same concentration camp, where they undergo torture and a sterilizing process that robs them of their magical powers. Worst of all, Saleem argues, is the Widow's strategic "draining-out of hope" (437). Rushdie thus uses the forms of magical realism to address historical and terrifying wounds inflicted by what he denounces as a despotic government. To convey the horrors of this type of totalizing repression—a second era of prolonged midnight—Rushdie shows how the infinite possibilities that existed for India as it gained its independence from the British, symbolized by the magical nature of the midnight's children, are annihilated as the children are forcibly sterilized and lose their magic powers:

She had cut it out of us [...] she had devised the operation of our annihilation, and now we were nothing, who were we, a mere 0.00007 per cent, now fishes could not be multiplied nor base metals transmuted; gone forever, the possibilities of flight and lycanthropy and the originally-one-thousand-and one marvellous promises of a numinous midnight. (439)

Like Clara's magical spirits that are silenced by the ruling military junta as it caused thousands of people to disappear, the mass-sterilizations performed by Indira Gandhi annihilates the magical possibilities, the alternative realities, and the various hopes of those who had dreamt of a free and independent India in which different ethnicities and religions could coexist. The magic in these magical realist texts is representative of freedom. The intrusion of the "irreducible element" of magic that breaks up the seamlessness of the narrative is both an act of defiance and a way of challenging (by rewriting a specific historical moment in the subversive mode of magical realism) those who would seek to impose a unilateral and totalizing concept of "reality". In its appropriation of the sublime, magical realism is able to utilize the terrifying tropes of the Gothic (that naturally lend themselves to totalizing versions of History that repress the subjective and oppositional voices of the

individual) to create its own version of the magical sublime. The magical sublime allows these oppressed voices to become agents of their own narration by allowing them to emerge from the abyss of terror. In *The Back Room*, Franco's totalizing presence is illustrated when the narrator upon hearing of his death feels as if "Time unfroze" (137). In discussing the supernatural sublime, of which the magical sublime is a direct descendent, Voller argues:

The supernatural sublime begins with the traditional drama of the sublime experience—the "motions of the soul" are frozen in their confrontation with the suprarational or suprahuman—but the object embodying the extranatural is, if not unmasked as natural, invested with daemonic potency. In the space of helplessness sublimity opens, such objects call forth only horror and a sense of numinous dread. Thus the supernatural sublime, at least in its radical mode, questions or denies the possibility of spiritual consolation. (19)

In both *The House of the Spirits* and *Midnight's Children*, the figures of evil both fictional and real (Esteban García, Shiva, General Pinochet, and Indira Ghandi) are revealed to be "daemonic" because they *aren't* unmasked as "unnatural". These figures of evil are unfortunately all too real, and in their embodiment of Terror, they become like the vampires, devils, and evil ghosts of the Gothic. As Kim Sasser argues in her thesis, *The Magical Sublime: A New-Old Lens on Magical Realism*, "Because the magic in magical realism represents that which defies reason, the use of this device is an appropriate means to dramatize events in history which also defy reason" (23).

Magical realism's use of the sublime thus allows it to explore the horrors of a not too distant past, not as a form of escapism, or to seek solace, but to foreground how an imposed, inhumane, and oppressive reality can seem almost unreal. The political horrors of the Franco, Pinochet, and Ghandi governments, the *unpresentable*, *unspeakable*, and *terrorizing* realities that they inflicted upon their respective peoples, can most fittingly be

approached in language through the terror of the Burkean sublime. Using past and present themes of the sublime, magical realist writers and their readers are able to gaze upon these historical fissures, seek out the silenced voices of the disappeared and the dead, and bring them to life via the “irreducible” element of magic.

Conclusion

The speed with which magical realism has grown in popularity and influence in the last few decades, over a varied spectrum of cultures and continents, and the way it has flourished and extended into varying branches of postmodern discourses, have made it more than just a transient or self-contained literary phenomenon. One of the main purposes of this study has been to illustrate not just its origins in the Gothic and fantastic literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—thus connecting it to a literary

lineage that extends almost as far back as realism and the birth of the modern novel—but to show how, in the midst of the decline of the realist mode of writing, the fantastic and magical realist mode of fiction has grown and flourished, adapted to the postmodern concerns of the latter half of the twentieth century and evolved up to the present day.

By adapting to the changes in the perspectives of “reality” and the “world” triggered by the overwhelming historical changes and discoveries in physical science and psychology, and evolving to include metafictional strategies and ontological concerns, while still remaining true to its origins as a subversive and challenging mode, magical realism has extended the literary life-span of the fantastic, and perhaps even, it can be argued, the modern novel as a form. It is, without a doubt, a strong contributor to the “replenishment” of literature (204) that John Barth talked about in his essay “The Literature of Replenishment”.

Magical realism’s continuing involvement with the sublime has been one of the aspects this study has focused on, not only to show its connections to a literary heritage begun in the Enlightenment era, but to explore it separately from its more obvious and sometimes exclusive association with postcolonial discourse and Latin American fiction. This study has been an attempt to free both the fantastic and magical realism from the confines to which they are often restricted, just as it has been an attempt to explore more thoroughly the creatively freeing properties that exist within the mode of the fantastic in general, and magical realism in particular—which also allows it to provide a powerful voice for the politically oppressed. The mode of the fantastic, as it is defined in this study, as a literature that is set in this “world” but intruded upon by another, is a mode that will always seek and invite reader hesitation. For it is in that hesitation, between two or even multiple

interpretations or between alternatives to “official” and/or totalizing ideologies, that the fantastic and magical realism draw much of their significance and strength.

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