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By David Pendery

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Introduction

A long time ago there was a style in literature called “realism,” with an appealingly straightforward definition: realism was the depiction of “the physical surfaces, the particularities of the sensate world in which fictional characters [live]” (Norton 6). Such a mimetic approach is still viable in literature, but during its history the conception of realism in literature has been stretched in many directions beyond its original bounds, in order to afford it more space to explore experience. As early as the mid-19th century, above and beyond its depiction of the surface details of life, realism had aims as a sort of “documentary” tool to be used to explore political and social conditions. By the late 19th-century the first hints of modernism were excavating new methods and approaches in literature, and many artists and analysts questioned whether realistic depiction of human endeavor was practicable or desirable, and whether the social and moral aims of early realistic writers were naïve or one-dimensional. This skepticism would burgeon, and by the late 20th century “a variety of approaches (deconstructionist, femi-
nist, gender-oriented, new historicist, postcolonial and psychoanalytic) [had] opened up the multiple meanings of realism” (Hadjiafxendi).

Magical realism, the major branch of literary realism through which I shall examine Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1978) in this paper, is surely one of the most innovative developments in the realism tradition. Magical realism employs many of the representational tools of standard realism to achieve its aims, and in this way it remains grounded in realism proper. But in the tradition of expanded definitions of realism in fiction, it does much more. For alongside realistic portrayals of “a normal, modern world with authentic descriptions of humans and society” (Moore), magical realism contrasts (we might say “problematizes”) straightforward realism with “the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality” (Moore), and posits an “intimate interdependence between reality and fantasy” (Rios). Employing such an approach, Toni Morrison’s magical realist fiction “requires of the reader an act of imagination and an acceptance of something more than or outside of our comprehension of life” (Krumholz 30).

In *Song of Solomon* Morrison employs many of these elements of magical realism (as well as additional elements to be included in an expanded definition, below), but my focus will be her depictions of conscious experience in her fiction.¹ We shall see that conscious experience evinces magical realism in literature in unique ways, and that Morrison’s depictions of consciousness in *Song of Solomon* effectively depict highly realistic experience within black communities, black families and the lives of black individuals, as well as Morrison’s own brand of contingently magical constituents and situations.

**Realism into Magical Realism**

¹ Note that I shall use the terms “conscious experience” and “consciousness” interchangeably in this paper.
Magical realism as a branch in the realistic tradition would probably be seen by early proponents of the genre as heresy. But, as noted, proponents of realism have long redefined and expanded the style’s frontiers. During its development in the 19th century, realism embraced distinctly political motivations, wherein the right way to depict reality in fiction was in the representation of the lives of the disenfranchised and lower classes in society. (Interestingly, some 100 years and more later, this same conception has been taken up in magical realism, which is steered by a commitment to “strong contemporary social relevance” [Rios], and exploration of “marginal characters, ideas, places” [Sellman]). As noted above, analysts and writers in the 19th century began to recognize that much realistic fiction in this mold was wanting, because it ignored the unseen, the unexplained, the mysterious, the illusionary, the imaginative, the felt in human experience. George Eliot criticized Dickens in 1872 for not adequately relating what Eliot called the “organic qualities” of personal experience to realistic external conditions (Hadjiafxendi). The naturalist writers who developed in the 19th century (related but nonetheless very different from the realists of the time) took these approaches even further, and “challenged the factitiousness of realist depictions of full-scale historical or social events, and…gave a new sense of the individual and society as determined by what we would soon learn to call ‘unconscious forces’” (Hadjiafxendi). We see here in the evolution of realism in literature a nod toward including conscious (and unconscious) experience in fiction. This conception of how realistic fiction could and should depict what was “really real” would, by the modernist period in the mid-20th century, blow realism wide open. In her “Modern Fiction” (1919) Virginia Woolf chastised “materialist” (that is, realist) writers who concerned themselves “not with the spirit but with the body,” and ultimately made “the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring.” Woolf (and many of her modernist contemporaries) believed that writers and artists
could most truthfully and realistically represent “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day” as a well of vivid experience and mental imagery, “a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (quotes from Woolf). To Woolf and to many a writer after her, consciousness—what can be seen (or, alternatively, conceived, believed, perceived, imagined, intended, felt, thought) in the mind’s eye—was now fair game in realistic fiction. In adopting this focus, writers of Woolf’s era and beyond contributed a brick to the then-developing edifice of magical realism (and also contributed important ideas and technique to many other styles and genres).

Dr. Lois Parkinson Zamora has written that modern magical realism, “confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts…[it] does not try to copy the surrounding reality…but to seize the mystery that breathes behind things (121-123). Guatemalan Nobel Prize winner Miguel Angel Asturias, one of the first major magical realist authors from the 1940s through the 1980s, is said to have written from a colorful palette that included his “love of nature and of the mythical world,” his Latin American heritage, and an “accumulation of nightmares and totemic phantasms” (Österling). Speaking in his Nobel Prize lecture in 1967, Asturias said that his writing portrayed,

...accounts in which reality is dissolved in fable, legend, the trappings of beauty and in which the imagination, by dint of describing all the reality that it contains, ends up re-creating a reality that we might call surreal. This characteristic of the annulment of reality through imagination and the re-creation of a more transcendental reality is combined with a constant annulment of time and space… (emphasis added)

Asturias’s conception of a “reality” that is “surrealist,” and “the annulment of reality” no doubt seems distinctly unreal to many readers, but it is essential to keep in mind that the goal of magical realism is to combine the realistic with the fanciful in order to yield “singularly…unexpected richness of reality” which, to proponents of this genre is “no less ‘real’ than
traditional ‘realism’” (quotes from Rios). Thus, by way of magical realism, the expansion of realism’s potential that had been underway since the 19th century developed to include not only “a normal, modern world with authentic descriptions of humans and society” (Moore) but also a range of experience and description that variously included:

- Kaleidoscopic elements from world cultures
- Images and narrative from religions, spirituality and metaphysical traditions
- Pronounced oppositions that created spectacular contrasts
- Myth, folk tale, magic tales and traditions
- Luxuriant, richly detailed depictions of the natural world
- Conscious experience, imagination and dreams
- Drug-induced and hallucinatory experience
- Nontraditional and experimental art forms, such as surrealism and non-linear writing approaches

Combined, these varied constituents of magical realism become “an essentially synthetic or totalizing way of depicting reality” (Rios) that allow, within the larger realistic tradition, deeper exploration of “the intertextual complexities of [the] pursuit of the ideal within the particularities of common life and familiar landscape” (Hadjiafxendi).

**Magical Realism in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*: Themes and Methods**

There are many “standard” elements of magical realism in *Song of Solomon*, including slices of Western, native African and African American folklore, fairy tales, mythology, culture and spiritual traditions; characters with magic powers who can see backward and forward in time, as well as “shape changers,” healers, witches and tricksters; ghosts, and characters who communicate with the dead (these are the “ex-centric focalizers” referred to by Hegerfeldt and others); and extraordinary descriptions of the natural world, bursting with vivid detail. I shall occasional-
ly refer to these elements in this analysis, but my focus will be on Morrison’s depictions of the interconnected, intimate, flamboyant world of communal, familial and individual awareness and conscious experience, including emotion, memory, cognition, mental imagery, linguistic play, a sense of self, and *qualia*—the rich phenomenology of sensory experience. These qualities, we shall see, have unique “magical” qualities all their own, for consciousness itself has been called “evanescent,” “the last surviving mystery,” and “one of the greatest miracles” (Block 3-4). To many analysts, how sentient consciousness emerges from the “gray matter” of the human brain “is just as unaccountable as the appearance of Djin when Aladdin rubbed his lamp” (McGinn qtd. in Block 3). We can see that there is a generous allowance in these analyses for depictions of “magical” experiences—the unseen, the unexplained, the mysterious, the illusory, the imaginative, the felt—within a “realistic” framework of human awareness, perception, cognition and emotion. Magical realism provides just such a platform for the “incongruous application of realist techniques to a fantastic subject matter,” creating an ideal ground for the exploration of the “epistemological potential” of “alternative outlooks” (quotes from Hegerfeldt).

Throughout *Song of Solomon*, readers are treated to a fascinating array of conscious experience, which reflects Morrison’s themes of bearing witness to the disturbed past of black people(s), exploring division within a family that has lived through that past, and chronicling personal quests to reconstruct splintered identity at the personal, family and community levels. To create the conscious experience that brings so much of Morrison’s work to life, imbuing her novels not only with vibrant, directly-encountered realism, but also ethereal, magical themes and experiences, she first accesses her own consciousness and experience (we might say, as most novelists do). Dr. Daniel C. Dennett has written that the interior “spoken language of thought” (149, emphasis in original) gives rise to the ability to organize experience, make complex
associations, and ultimately to use language for varied purposes for internal (private) and external (public) communication—both central constituents of consciousness. “Writ on the page” in *Song of Solomon* Morrison weaves her conscious experience, private and public, re-inscribed through the characters and situations of her fiction, into a dense magical realist web of “memory, the association of ideas in the mind, the causes of emotions and the individual’s sense of self” (Lodge 40).

One segment of conscious experience Morrison adumbrates are vivid descriptions of *qualia* (sense perceptions including colors, tastes, smells, sounds and the like). There are many such examples in the book and most are not only detailed descriptions of sensory experience, and also serve to advance her themes. Below two examples will suffice to illustrate this point. In the first scene, Morrison compounds the realistic but suggestive, mysterious quality of a sweet ginger odor, by contrasting the prosaic Michigan town where the event takes place and an unknown Far Eastern locale. Richly sensuous though it is, Morrison’s evocative description complements her realistic themes of lament for lost community and culture, as well as the restless search for personal identity. The “each” at the end of the paragraph refers to Milkman Dead, whose search for meaning and a way out of his purposeless existence comprises the primary thematic thrust of the novel, and his friend Guitar, who is also wrestling with identity issues:

On autumn nights, in some parts of the city, the wind from the lake brings a sweetish smell to shore. An odor like crystallized ginger, or sweet iced tea with a dark clove floating in it…. [T]his heavy spice-sweet smell…made you think of the East and striped tents and the sha-sha-sha of leg bracelets…. To the Southside residents who were awake on such nights, it gave all their thoughts and activity a quality being both intimate and far away. The two men standing near the pines on Darling street—right near the brown house where wine drinkers went—could smell the air, but they didn’t think of ginger. Each thought it was the way freedom smelled, or justice, or luxury, or vengeance. (184-185)
Further on, during the hunt scene, the following wonderfully realized descriptions of sounds cohere with Morrison’s exploration of intersubjective communication among and between groups (which, in a deft, magically realist turn, includes the group’s hunting dogs!):

The men and the dogs were talking to each other. In distinctive voices they were saying distinctive, complicated things. The long yah sound was followed by a specific kind of howl from one of the dogs. The low howm howm that sounded like a string bass imitating a bassoon meant something the dogs understood and executed. And the dogs spoke to the men: single-shot barks—evenly spaced and widely spaced—one every three or four minutes, that might go on for twenty minutes…. All those shrieks, those rapid tumbling barks, the long sustained yells, the tubas sounds, the drumbeat sounds, the low liquid howm howm, the reedy whistles, the thin eee’e’s of a cornet, the unh unh unh bass chords. It was all language. (277-278)

In her depiction of the interrelated memories of Song of Solomon’s characters, Morrison taps into another central aspect of conscious experience. Many of the characters relate lengthy memories in the narrative, creating “a sprawling, river-with-tributaries-branching-in-all-directions novel” and generating a gradually congealing collective memory (David 92). Such technique allows Morrison to link experience and development across time and space, with the varied memories, creating an atemporal composite that is realistic while being endowed with an aura of mystery.

An extended example of Morrison’s employment of memory (combined with qualia and personal conscious awareness), is seen when Chapter 10 opens as Milkman gazes at the family friend Circe’s house, which “looked as if it had been eaten by a galloping disease, the sores of which were dark and fluid” (220). From here, in classic Morrison fashion, the narrative shifts into Milkman’s memory, which traces back through his airplane trip from his home in Michigan.

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2 Circe, a midwife who “delivered everybody” in Milkman’s father’s hometown (231) is one of Song of Solomon’s deftly imagined magical characters, an ageless woman who “might in any case still be dead—as a matter of fact, she had to be dead…because out of the toothless mouth came the strong, mellifluous voice of a twenty-year-old girl” (240 emphasis in original).
to his father’s home state of Pennsylvania, his last conversation with his friend Guitar (which itself sidelong into Guitar’s memories of his mother and father), his bus ride to his father’s childhood home and encounter with his father’s old friends, his automobile ride out to Circe’s—and back beneath the walnut trees outside Circe’s house, where we had left Milkman 19 pages before. Employing such memory-collage technique, Morrison collates information and experience into mosaics of conscious experience, a principal element of her magical realist approach.

Morrison describes refugent tapestries of the conscious experience of many characters in Song of Solomon in order to advance her themes of search for identity and sense of self, with Milkman Dead’s search, as noted, the primary focus of the novel. In Milkman, through the healing of his stricken personal consciousness, we witness greater understanding of his communal and family consciousness. Milkman’s deepening sense of self, and his reach outside of his isolated personal consciousness toward genuine connection with others is beautifully illustrated in a classic passage in which he connects with his lover Sweet, engaging in an almost starkly realistic interactive mutuality:

He washed her hair. She sprinkled talcum on his feet. He straddled her behind and massaged her back. She put witch hazel on his swollen neck. He made up the bed. She gave him gumbo to eat. He washed the dishes. She washed his clothes and hung them out to dry. He scoured her tub. She ironed his shirt and pants… (285)

As personal as Morrison’s characters and writing are, we know that she always has her “eyes on the prize” of greater community consciousness and better understanding of the historical experiences that connect black people. To fully realize this activist aim, Morrison links personal and community identity development in intensely realistic (that is, magically realistic) ways, with characters bearing witness to their individual and collective pasts as they search for connections to strengthened personal and community consciousness. In chapter 15, Milkman
reflects on his quest, now complete, visualizing a panoply of others he has interacted with and communities he has been too that have impacted him and contributed to his emergent sense of self and community connection. His reflections and mental imagery appeal to his personal, familial and community development, and the emergence of the mass of names in the ensuing paragraph reaches to the very essence of consciousness and selfhood—a fact that Toni Morrison has realized as perceptively as any writer: (the list of names extends even further than this example):

He closed his eyes and thought of the black men in Shalimar, Roanoke, Petersburg, Newport News, Danville, in the Blood bank, on Darling Street, in the pool halls, the barber-shops. Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness. Macon Dead. Sing Byrd, Crowell Byrd, Pilate, Reba, Hagar, Magdalene, First Corinthians, Milkman, Guitar, Railroad Tommy, Hospital Tommy, Empire State (he just stood around and swayed), Small Boy, Sweet, Circe, Moon, Nero, Humpty-Dumpty, blue Boy, Scandinavia, Quack-Quack, Jericho, Spoonbread, Ice Man, Dough Belly… (330)

**Conclusion**

In her work, Toni Morrison brings human experience vividly to life in ways that have rarely been equaled in literature. In her “Black Matters,” Morrison wrote how she had borne witness to “the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world” (Playing in the Dark 17). Such a description could be used for the fecund dimensionality and mysterious nature of human consciousness itself, the portrayal of which is a primary building block in Morrison’s magical realism, which she constructs into “amalgamation[s] of realism and fantasy” in her novels (Flores qtd. in Hegerfeldt). In her writing we see ourselves, our families, our neighbors, our ancestors interacting in a dazzling variety of simultaneously realistic and magical awareness, experience, intuition and development. After *Song of
Solomon, Morrison continued in her *Beloved, Jazz, Paradise* and *Love* to explore sense of self, family, community, and history, on this path paved with multiple levels of conscious experience. Through Morrison’s work, the world is a better place, and we are all more attuned to the “magical realism” that permeates existence.
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