A Theory of Genre Formation in the Twentieth Century

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Rodgers, "A Theory of Genre Formation in the Twentieth Century" (174.5): "He knew, of course, that good ... that he had made his way to spiritual beings or just other ..."

Although his decapitation is suggested by the librarian who "sat doubled up, vomiting." Cincinnatus' non-death is implied by his "getting up and looking around." That Cincinnatus "made his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him" not only confounds the reader's d\-ou whether he actually makes his way to the other side, but he also undermines the presence of opaque-like people (190-91). Further, the contradictory understanding of Invitation's execution scene has a parallel in the text that introduced lo real maravilloso to the Americas: Alejo Carpentier in his 1949 The Kingdom of this World. The novella details the events surrounding the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), the only successful slave revolution in the history of the Americas where Haitians gained
independence from their French colonizers. Having fled Russia in 1919 in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Nabokov family headed to England before settling in Berlin. In 1937, with rising anti-Semitism in Germany, Nabokov and his Jewish wife Vera Slonim and son Dmitri moved to Paris. Nabokov reveals these tumultuous political environments in the foreword to the English translation of Invitation that he: "composed the Russian original exactly a quarter of a century ago in Berlin, some fifteen years after escaping from the Bol-
shevist aesthetic, and just before the Nazi régime reached its full volume of welcome. The question
whether or not my seeing how in terms of the droll, nicely farcical art of this book should
concern one to a good reader as little as it does me” (7). Confirming that the notion that readers should always
be careful of taking authors' words at face value, the text's conformist world, ostentatious trials, and
depiction of the castigated outsider suggests that socio-political contexts impacted the genesis of Nab-
okov's book. Indeed, in Strong Opinions Nabokov calls both Invitation and Bend Sinister "absolutely
final indictments of Russian and German totalitarianism” (156). Interestingly, this goes against Mi-
ichael Tratner’s perspective that “the Modernist era marked a retreat from Victorian concern with social
issues into intrapersonal, self-reflection, and introspection, sensualism, or asepsis in the balance” (3). In "Religionism, or aesthetism in the balance" for example, György Lukács laments the demise of the realist movement and modernism's frequent inability,
as a "one-dimensional" art form to confront the mainstream of society (1033). However, Invita-
tion, published in the same year as Lukács's study, can be seen to conflate realist and modernist prac-
tice in problematizing verisimilitude through experimentation while engaging, albeit allusively, with socio-political concerns. This also goes against the numerous comments Nabokov made repudiating interest in politics. In Lectures on Literature for example, Nabokov claims that "the study of the socio-
logical or political impact of literature has to be devised mainly for those who are by temperament or
education immune to the aesthetic vibrancy of authentic literature, for those who do not experience the
telltale tinge between the shoulder blades" (64).

That Invitation’s conception occurred at a time of literary experimentation and political oppression
mirrors the formation of magical realism in twentieth-century Latin America. With the threat of gov-
ernment intervention, writers commented frequently on political situations through allegorical or
roman à clef texts which enabled them to question existing power structures with reduced likelihood of
retribution. The period of prolonged civil war in Colombia, for example, known as la violencia (1948-58),
saw a rebellion against a system of social and economic stratification. Michael Wood claims that "The violence came from guerrillas, gangsters, self-defence groups, the police, the army; and some
200,000 people (the low estimate) died in it. When it was said to be over, or more or less under con-
trol, in 1962, there were still 200 civilian deaths a month. The violence provoked a flood of fiction, and
García Márquez himself addresses it in the Colonel and in In Evil Hour. It makes sense to say that the Violence appears in One Hundred Years of Solitude as the massacre of striking work-
ers, which is violent enough and could stand as a compression and anticipation of the later phenome-
non, an allusion and a synecdoche" (9-10). The following passage from One Hundred Years of Solitude
not only depicts the political commentary that Wood describes, but is also noticeable for perpetuating
the manner in which death is conveyed in both Invitation and Kingdom: “After his shout something
happened that did not bring on fright but a kind of hallucination. The captain gave the order to fire
and fourteen machine guns answered at once. But it all seemed like a farce. It was as if the machine
guns had been loaded with caps, because their panting rattle could be heard and their incandescent
spitting could be seen, but not the slightest reaction was perceived, not a cry, not even a sigh among
the compact crowd that seemed petrified by an instantaneous invulnerability. Suddenly, on one side of
the station, a cry of death tore open the enchantment: ‘Aaagh, Mother’” (311). Although García Már-
quyes’s depiction may simply be coercing readers to accept temporal rupturing rather than a split
event, the scene’s relationship to the executions in Invitation and Kingdom is marked. Such engage-
ment with real-life political threat and disjuncture in the face of finitude suggest an alliance between
Invitation and magical realism by proposing that oppressive systems can be weakened through intelli-
gent subversion. Zamora and Faris, for example, claim that: “In magical realist texts, ontological dis-
ruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given as a cultural cor-
rective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motiva-
tion (3). This cohabitation of the hyper-real and the real suggests a redefinition of the notion that
asks readers to refashion established patterns of political and literary thought. In doing so, readers are
effectively able to infer why writers might be including magical happenings and therefore can de-
code the text: “In contrast to the magical images constructed by Surrealism out of ordinary objects,
which aim to appear virtually unmotivated and thus programmatically resist interpretation, magical
realist images, while projecting a similar initial aura of surprising craziness, tend to reveal their moti-
vations—psychological, social, emotional, political—after some scrutiny” (Faris 171). I should like to
note that the texts under analysis here are not straightforward political allegories. Instead, it is the
coupling of socio-political context with realist subversion that is integral. That is, they adopt realist
prose fiction operators (fidelity to ordinary subject matter, linear progression, verisimilitude) to toy
with their accepted implications. In the twentieth century, reacting against the world of the novel and
a heightened threat of warfare, anti-realist narrative forms can be seen to subvert the political context
of a literary tradition in a way that liberates the textual experience.

Faris’s and Zamora’s idea of magical realism being “antibureaucratic, against the established social
order” (3), in this respect, aligns with Bowers’ claim that the “narrative mode ... [is] chosen for the
purposes of literary experimentalism” (65). Indeed, Faris claims that texts such as Isabel Allende’s The
House of the Spirits or Toni Morrison’s Beloved “respond to a desire for narrative freedom from realism,
and from a univocal narrative stance; they implicitly correspond textually in a new way to a criti-
tique of the literary norms of all kinds but” (160). It is perhaps unsurprising that Invitation fails to fit
the realist mould in being “a literary convention toward which Nabokov has shown both lofty disdain
and impish mockery” (Connelly 47). Yet Nabokov engages with the realist agenda through his contin-
ual dismissal of it in the afterword to Lolita, Nabokov claims that “reality’ [is] (one of the few words
which mean nothing without quotes) (312). Indeed, in undermining the conventional values and infer-
ences that readers draw traditionally from such texts, Invitation punctures the politics of realist fiction.
In this respect, the novella actively engages with what Hans Robert Jauss labels the horizon of expec-
tations, a term used to “designate the set of cultural norms, assumptions, and criteria shaping the
way in which readers understand and judge a literary work at a given time ... Such 'horizons' are subject to historical change, so that a later generation of readers may see a very different range of meanings in the same work, and revalue it accordingly" (Bassick 116). In extraordinary genre, the assembly of conceptual and thematic relationships between text and genre, my case study demonstrates the benefits of comingling socio-political history and literary tradition in order to facilitate revaluation.

In *Kinds of Literature*, Alastair Fowler outlines two ways in which genres can form: monogenesis and assembly of the repertoire. For the purpose of my discussion, I engage with the assembly of the repertoire initially. Fowler claims that "in literature there is no creation ex nihilo ... Either the new kind is the result of invention of an entirely new form, or the gathering together of existing generic materials" (156). A piece of literature, he goes on to say, is inevitably influenced by the genres that have preceded it and so cannot be written in a vacuum: "Todorov's dictum that 'a new genre is always a transformation of one or several old genres' is clearly right in its broad lines" (158). Yet Fowler claims that "The phase of assembly may of course be largely unconscious. The author perhaps thinks only of writing in a fresh way. It will be his successors who first see the potential for genre and recognise, retrospectively, that assembly of a new form has taken place ... Whether or not it is meant to be innovative, the assembled form is apprehended as a new genre only from a subsequent perspective. This retrospective critical insight regroups individual works, and sees them now as belonging to the new genre, now anticipating it, now differing in kind" (159). Given that *Invitation* is often classified as a member of "the literary genre known as dystopia, a type of anti-utopia" and linked with such works as Yevgeny Zamytin's novel *We* and George Orwell's *1984* (Connolly 6), one possible account of *Invitation* is that the theme of the novel, a "dark" understanding of the political present rather than the political past (for Joyce, the limits of renderable political history and literary tradition in order to facilitate revaluation.

As Jauss claims, narrative in a logical, realist manner can also be seen as a way of portraying realist events: "when we praise a work and that "no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone" (13, 22), the matter-of-fact incorporation of magical occurrences, a notably strong engagement with the phenomenal world, and the work's representational identity determines the idea that the novel has not been evolved from the dystopian genre; something akin to Harold Bloom's idea of swerving from a predecessor (14). Contrasting with assembly of the repertoire, however, is monogenesis: "the origins of genres are located in the achievements of individual writers. Each kind has a single inventor, in this theory, or at most two or three: epic goes back to Homer, tragedy to Aeschylus, the verisimilar novel to Fielding and Richardson, the historical novel to Scott, the open-form long poem to Pound and Williams" (Baldick). Therefore, the concept that "this is the contribution of successors, in the idea that the new genre is assembled" is as declarative as that of the 'originator.' That is obvious from the fact that if the originator has no successors, his achievement can only be an isolated one, without any significance for genre" (153). Fowler's example of Joyce's anti-novel, now deemed a pre-emptory exemplar of postmodernist fiction, is particularly apt in relation to my study: "Literature may take occasional leaps of generic originality... A *Finnegans Wake* may depart radically from existing forms; but then it is likely to remain unassimilated, until more dilute imitations provide the missing generic context ex post facto" (168).

It is important to keep in mind that *Invitation* has not been integrated comfortably into an existing category of genre or been brought into alignment with magical realism. Yet, this *ex post facto* process of providing generic context is important as it privileges readers with hindsight with the ability to assign generic labels. Such retrospection, with the appropriate evidence, allows *Invitation* to be read as a magical realist text. As Jauss claims, genres "cannot be deduced or defined, but only historically determined, delimited, and described" (86). In doing so, it strengthens the alternative idea that genre, in the late twentieth century at least, is something that can be defined and redefined, a notion that is not without its own reductio ad absurdum: the new genre is defined as an artistic, realist manner can also be seen as a way of portraying people "dehumanized in the capitalist system" (Bowers 29). Initially started in 1928 and published in 1967, Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* has considerable political parallels with *Invitation* in engaging with "the housing crisis, the state-controlled economy, [and] the early years of terror under Stalin" (Weeks 5). For, like the texts I examine, *Master* includes numerous past, acts of logical, realist narrative to describe anti-realistic events: "At a huge writing desk with a massive inkstand an empty suit sat and with a dry pen, not dipped in ink, traced on a piece of paper. The suit was wearing a necklace, a fountain pen stuck from its pocket, but above the collar there was neither neck nor head, just as there were no hands sticking out of the sleeves. The suit was immersed in work and completely ignored the turmoil that reigned around it" (185). The novel's pre-empting of magical realist traits (an "irreducible element" of magic, matter-of-fact narration, and a strong presence of the phenomenal world) act to harpoon Soviet oppression and critique the idea that change is unfeasible.
Earmarking David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* alongside other late 1990s texts such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, James Woods, claims that a "genre is hardening ... familial resemblances among art forms and a parent can be named: Dickens ... This is not magical realism. It is hysterical realism ... The conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted, and overworked" (<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-all-too-inhuman>). Woods's review is curious in at least two ways. First, his allusion to Nietzsche draws a literary analogy to the latter's idea of the "real world" or "noumenon" is not only inaccessible to man but also of no significance. Second, Wood's idea of realism being overworked or exhausted misses the an-real-ist nature of the texts in question and his raising of familial linkage redolent of the biological model of genre formation both downplays the extent to which realism has perpetuated unwanted coercion or norm enforcement and neglects the new forms of realism that such departure allows for (such as stream-of-consciousness fiction). Instead, *Infinite Jest*, a gargantuan novel set in a not-too-distant future version of North America, has at its core an anti-realist event, an esoteric film that subjects viewers to immediate boredom with other stimuli and eventually death. As such, its flouting of realist conventions, its overweight representation of our modern hyperconnected, corporate societies to examine specific social phenomena, suggests common linkage between anti-realist narrative forms in the twentieth century. Our hesitation to chart such resemblances and ponder their implications seems to derive from our inherited biological model of genre.

Fowler posits in his conclusion to *Kinds of Literature* that extraliterary events are one way in which genres change: "pastoral was obviously affected by urban development; the factory novel has some connexion with the Industrial Revolution". How is a Genre Created? Five Combinatory Hypotheses. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.7 (2013): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss4/2/39>.<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-all-too-inhuman>

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

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