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*Eyes deep with
unfathomable histories*

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Pauline Melville's marvels of reality

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Born in Guyana of an English mother and Guyanese (part South American Indian, African and Scottish) father, Pauline Melville now lives in London but travels all over the world, and frequently to faraway parts with no Internet connection. Writing, as she herself says, gives her an opportunity to understand her mixed parentage, especially her father's side. In her fiction, her English as well as her Guyanese heritage is of paramount importance. In "Mixed" she wrote: "Sometimes, I think/My mother with her blue eyes/And flowered apron/Was exasperated/At having such a sallow child/And my mulatto dadee/Silenced/By having such an English-looking one" (2001: 45).¹ Her Guyanese Indian legacy proved to be the most ample resource of stories, in which the magical and the real come into contact. In contemporary critical works, she is most frequently praised for her innovative use of "lo realismo maravilloso".

No wonder her texts are often evoked in connection with magic realism theory. In a recent work on magic(al) realism, Mary Ann Bower notes that "...Pauline Melville, has written three very different fictional works using the same [as Wilson Harris] magical realist techniques. Her first novel *The ventriloquist's tale* (1997 [1998]) is based in the same geographical terrain of the Caribbean coast as Garcia Marquez, this time in Guyana, where she was born, rather than Colombia, and has the same exuberant narrative and richness of detail" (Bowers 2005: 60). *The ventriloquist's tale* is a text that highlights Guyana's multi-cultural and multi-lingual traditions.² Melville is very conscious of the Eurocentric ways of "reading Guyana". She disagrees with the common European claim that Walter Raleigh (c.1552-1618), while looking for El Dorado (1595), discovered the country which was to become British Guiana. She constantly makes us aware that works such as Walter Edmund Roth's (1861-1933) *An inquiry into the animism and folk-lore of the Guiana Indians* (1915) or Evelyn Waugh's (1903-1966) *Ninety-two days* (1932) do not give justice to the land and its people. Writing from the perspective of Wapisiana Indians, Melville is able to circumvent European traditions of the representation of Native Americans. Waugh's Rupununi Savannah is full of flies and heat, has no roads and is a hell to

1 The poem is taken from a collection edited by David Dabydeen (2001).

2 Melville uses some of her family history in the novel. Her predecessor, Mr. Melville is still quite a famous figure in Guiana, the family was mentioned by Waugh and perhaps more surprisingly by a Polish traveler and writer Arkady Fiedler (2010: CXCII - CXCIV). The book was first suggested to me by Natalia Brzozowska during our Ph.D. seminar (2011) and then given to me as a farewell present by my MA students, the class of 2011.

the Europeans used to certain comforts. Melville's Rupununi Savannah, 5000 square miles of grasslands, swamp lands, and rain forested mountains, is full of wonders of nature and indeed could be treated as "an Eco-Tourist's Dream", the phrase frequently used by the Tourism Association of Guyana³. While describing a project of preparing a Wapisiana dictionary, Melville talks about all the drawbacks of such an enterprise, recognizing the legitimacy of the Indian mentality according to which "innovation is not necessarily improvement. Something is always lost for whatever is gained" (Melville, Jan. 21, 2007).⁴

Bearing in mind her Native American birthright, Melville's "Prologue" to *The ventriloquist's tale*⁵ is written "in a style imitating oral storytelling and provides an introduction to the narrator's carnivalesque excessive character, who even before his own birth was endowed with extraordinary gifts that allowed him to give guidance to his mother" (Bowers 2005: 60). Melville herself notices that "[i]n *Ninety-two days* Waugh mentions hearing the story of a certain Mr. Melville, a parson's son from Jamaica, who in an unsuccessful attempt at gold-washing in the interior "was found dying of fever by some Wapisiana Indians in the Upper Essequibo". He married two Wapisiana/Atorad sisters and stayed to live with the Wapisiana people – the Wapichannao – and had ten children. To this day there are numerous Melville descendants living throughout that region. It is not too fanciful to imagine that the character of sinister half-Indian Mr. Todd in 'A handful of dust' [inverted commas in original, LS], who captures the ill-fated Englishman and forces him to read Dickens *ad aeternum*, is based on one of them" (Afterword, Pauline Melville, Jan 3, 2007).⁶ Melville's novel received Whitbread First Novel Award and was awarded Whitbread Prize for Best First Novel and was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction. Her stories *Shape-shifter: Stories* (1990), which won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Guardian Fiction Prize and the MacMillan Silver Pen award⁷ and *The migration of ghosts* [1998] (1999), which was chosen by the New York Public Library as one of the twenty five Best Books published that year, though are not restricted to Guyana and Britain, still explore the marvellous which occurs in everyday life. Maya Jaggi, in an interview on Jan 2, 2010, claims that Melville is weaves myth with reality in a style reminiscent of an earlier Guyanese writer, Wilson Harris (*Guardian* interview, Jan 2, 2010). To quote Melville's eponymous narrator: "Now, alas,

3 Inhabitants: around 15,000 Wapisiana, Macushi and Wai-Wai Amerindians. The Rupununi savannahs are divided north from south, by the Kanuku Mountains.

4 The quotation comes from a paper entitled "The Wapichan Dictionary" which was sent by Pauline Melville (e-mail message, March 10, 2011).

5 Henceforth indicated as *VT* followed by page number. All quotations are from Melville, Pauline. 1997. *The ventriloquist's tale*. London: Bloomsbury.

6 I am using both the "Afterword" to Waugh's *92 Days* as well as the article about Wapichan dictionary from original Pauline Melville's files (e-mail message, March 10, 2011).

7 I am using original Pauline Melville's spelling, from an email message of May, 4th 2012.

fiction had to disguise itself as fact and I must bow to the trend and become a realist" (VT, 9).

Melville's most recent novel is *Eating air* (2009), which reworks the myth of Dionysius and the Bacchae, pays homage to Euripides and classical literature. It is both a political novel with some references to political terrorist activity, and a literary one, a true "novel of ideas" in the Huxleyan sense, in the manner of "realismo polifonico". In "polyphonic realism", after all, the "real" is just a matter of perception. At the British Council Contemporary Writers site, Salman Rushdie argues that "Pauline Melville writes with an unusually dispassionate lushness that is both intellectual and sensual ... I believe her to be one of the few genuinely original writers to emerge in recent years" (date of access 8 April 2011).

As an actress Pauline Melville claims that "there is almost nobody in the world I can't imagine myself being" (*Guardian* interview, Jan 02. 2010) and portrays, for example, Mrs. Tall in *Far from the madding crowd* (1967, directed by John Schlesinger). She also appeared as Mrs Wailace in *How to get ahead in advertising* (1989, directed by Bruce Robinson) and as Dawn in *Mona Lisa* (1986, directed by Neil Jordan). She has an episodic part in the new adaptation of Graham Green's novel *Brighton Rock* (2010, directed by Rowan Joffe).

We all remember Pauline Melville in different ways. During LIES 2011 Pauline Melville was so kind as to spend some time with the students who, inspired by her magnificent stories, wanted to get to know the writer and actress better, not only through her storytelling. As Marta Frątczak remembers, "... we expected the author to be a person with rich imagination, sensitivity towards other people and new cultures – and our intuition did not fail us". Excited by being given a chance to speak to her in person during breaks at the conference as well as when sightseeing around Poznań, the students fell under her spell immediately.

Katarzyna Bronk, who as the conference secretary assisted her during the conference, admits to being surprised that the award winning writer and amazingly talented actress turned out to be a very humble and kind person, genuinely interested in other people's lives. Wanting to be almost invisible to the outside world, Melville prefers to be anonymous so as to observe people, and life in general, and allow herself to be inspired by the magic of the everyday. And magic does happen to Melville. It is enough to mention, Bronk says, a talented violin player staying at the same hotel as the writer. Curious and appreciative of the beauty of the music that was flowing out of his room, she could not resist meeting the musician in person. Melville indeed *feels and sees* people and sometimes, as Joanna Jarzab recounts, she notes down conversations or ideas that she hears in the street, on the train or the bus.

Katarzyna Burzyńska adds that Melville, who is "a brilliant author of fiction, turned out to be also an electrifying personality full of appreciation for Polish culture and curious about Polish people. ... For her Poland emerged as a country with an extremely rich peasant culture and a huge body of legends and folk

stories". Frątczak also remembers that Melville admitted to being a devoted admirer of the late Wisława Szymborska, who, according to her, "possessed the unique ability to express the inexpressible through simple images and words".

Reminiscing on Melville's visit, Joanna Ludwikowska-Leniec recounts a conversation about maps and travelling. It seems that the Wapisiana not only do well without maps, but have no need at all to use them. They memorize details of terrain and describe any journey according to the sites which need to be passed by, never drawing them on anything, trusting in their topographic memory. Jarzab remembers Melville's personal story of getting lost while visiting her family's neighbours on foot. The Guyanese quite often travel more than one day so no one is afraid when he or she does not get back home by night, even though this means spending the night on the savannahs or in the forest. Scary as it may sound, such scenes are then magically woven into Melville's poetry and prose.

During the conference lecture – even though Melville always stresses that she is not an academic – the writer started with a statement that she never wore a watch for fear of having "time strapped to her body". This initial comment imparted a sense of mystery, which prevailed throughout her whole lecture. Melville also commented on the double meaning of the abbreviation of the conference's name – LIES. In her opinion the name perfectly fit the topic of the symposium as "it reflected the shifting borders between reality and its representation encapsulated in language or in literature". She then presented her stance on the possible sources of magic realism as well as the presence of magic in the Guyanese consciousness. According to Melville, history proper starts with the written word. However, before the written word comes into being it is oral history, belonging to the illiterate, that prevails. As it seems, ordinary people in Guyana would tend to trust the orally-transmitted word much more.

When commenting on magic realism, Melville said that the presence of mystery, magic and myth is also reflected in the native language of indigenous Wapsiana people. The lyric quality of the language is seen already in its basic phrases; for instance "good morning" in Wapsiana can be rendered in English as "Are you awake?" while a cobweb is a "spider's hammock". To give one more example, the word for "snack" in Wapsiana is "liar", because a snack is something that pretends to be a real meal, something that only deceives our stomachs. So it seems that already on the level of language Guyanese Amerindians are particularly sensitive to the intrusion of magical lyricism into the dimensions of time and space.

In her presentation Melville also addressed the use of mythology as characteristic of magic(al) realism which are ever present in her own fiction. She referred to the Amerindian beliefs in the magic qualities of solar eclipses. She also reminded the audience of the "kanaima" myth of the spirit of revenge, and with that she attempted to contrast the opposing outlooks on life in North America and among the indigenous peoples of South America. Western culture as epitomized

by the USA is all about “reinventing” oneself, while the Amerindians do not believe in progress or change. Melville highlighted the fact that along with the spread of the European Enlightenment and rationalism, the world – although richer with the ideas of secular humanism – lost part of its spiritual element, which is still present in the culture of Amerindians. Guyanese native inhabitants seem inactive and passive because for them the idea of progress is just an illusion. As a result, their culture is still infused with richness of myth and magic, which make it such a potent material for magic realist authors.

However, as Melville's *Eating air* proves, myth can be also used to make a political statement. In the last part of her talk Melville addressed the use and function of myth in her seemingly political novel about the phenomenon of terrorism. Although at a first glance the novel seems to have little in common with magic realism, references to myths play quite an important role in it. As Melville outlined it, the mysterious Baron S., an intriguing and slightly funny narrator of the story, is indeed a classic voodoo character from Haiti. Baron S. or Baron Somedi (“Somedi” means Saturday) is one of the Loa – Haitian voodoo spirits of fertility and death. He is known for his inclinations towards strong drinks and tobacco. In the novel he is dressed in a top hat and elegant clothes of an English gentleman. Surprisingly enough, Melville's depiction is not far from the original, traditional rendering of the spirit. Being the master of life and death, Baron S. seems to be a metaphorical rendition of “god-like” qualities of the narrator in the novel. As Melville put it, he is the “magical narrator” in the novel.

Apart from Haitian myths, Melville also pointed out allusions to classical mythology present in *Eating air*. In her presentation Melville acknowledged a passing reference to the myth of Venus and Adonis, as well as a loose re-working of *The Bacchae* by Euripides. In her opinion, one of her protagonists, Donny, is an anarchic force standing for the Dionysian force, while Ella is one of the wild maenads. For Donny what is most important is the euphoria of action. Ella, being a ballet dancer, is like a wild maenad following Dionysus. These characters are, according to Melville, people belonging to “the Dionysian explosion” – larger than themselves. Thus, even in this seemingly political novel, the mythic and the magical emerges from the rich web of characters and events.

Marta Frątczak summarises Melville's LIES lecture: “She told us how two distant traditions, English and Guyanese, affected her as a writer. From the former, she claims to have drawn her love for the written word. From the latter, sensitivity to myth, the world of nature and orally transmitted stories”. And even though she claims that Guyanese Indians do not really need her as a writer, anyone interested in venturing into the world of magic and myth, while having one foot still fixed on the solid ground, will look into Melville's “eyes deep with unfathomable stories” with pleasure.

In *The ventriloquist's tale*, Melville says that “[a]ll stories are told for revenge or tribute” (*VT*, 9). Ours is certainly written as a tribute to a great writer,

who helped us to re-discover the marvellous Guyana and the marvellous in Guyana and so much more.

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Towards a “third space”: Magic realism in English Canadian literature

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Homi Bhabba's concept of the “third space” the essay draws attention to such notions as *overlapping, remembering and healing* which keep recurring in many magic realist texts. It argues that instead of reconciling opposites within a single subject as in modernist novels, or substituting one side for the other as in mainstream postcolonial fiction, magic realism opens a new interstitial third space of ongoing negotiation in which potentially antagonistic individuals or cultures interact with each other and become ultimately transformed into something not only different but more genuine. This is illustrated in English Canadian texts written by white settlers, First-Nations writers and non-Caucasian migrants.

On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge where I and Thou meet, there is the realm of ‘between’. This reality, whose disclosure has begun in our time, shows the way, leading beyond individualism and collectivism, for the life of future generations. Here the genuine third alternative is indicated, the knowledge of which will help to bring about the genuine person again and to establish genuine community
(Martin Buber).

My personal connection with magic realism dates back to the 1980s when Jean Weisgerber, a colleague of mine at the University of Brussels, planning to edit a book on magic realism in different geographical areas as well as in a diversity of fields, asked me if I would like to contribute the chapter on magic realism in English literature. I accepted at once but found myself awfully embarrassed when it came to writing the first line of my essay. For me the strange oxymoron conjured up something like a childhood memory when, scratching the frost flowers on the windowpane of my bedroom, I had seen our garden magically transformed by the snow. But magic realism *in English literature*?

A few days later I came by chance upon an article which used the term in connection with Canadian artists. In no time I contacted Bill New at the University of British Columbia, who advised me to read Jack Hodgins's *The invention of the world* and to get in touch with Geoff Hancock, the editor-in-chief of *Canadian fiction magazine*. My German colleague Walter Pache sent me his copy of Hodgins's novel, my very first contact with English Canadian literature. Not long after that, on my first visit to Canada, I invited Geoff Hancock to meet me in my hotel in Toronto to talk about magic realism. As soon as he arrived, he immediately embarked on his favourite subject. Hancock was a formidable talent scout but he was a little carried away by his enthusiasm. It was not magic realism that put Canadian literature on the world map (though it was for me!) but the enormous financial effort of the Canadian government in all cultural fields since