

21. For an excellent discussion along these lines, see Minta, *Gabriel García Márquez*, pp. 138–41.
 22. *Ibid.*, pp. 142–43.

MICHAEL BELL

Not Flaubert's Parrot:
 Love in the Time of Cholera

Although Márquez' next novel keeps the familiar theme of time in its title, it now gives first place to the word 'love'. It tells, in a leisurely and protracted series of flashbacks, the story of the life-long love of the illegitimate, and once poor, Florentino Ariza for Fermina Daza. Their teenage love had been sustained largely by his letters as she was sent away by her ambitious father. But when they suddenly met after this long separation, her 'illusion' of love, as she then saw it, was immediately dispelled. She rejected him to marry, although also after a period of rejection, the socially well-placed doctor Juvenal Urbino, who was already some thirty years old. Much of the book is taken up with a study of this marriage and of the myriad affairs by which Florentino tries to fill the space left by Fermina while waiting one day to possess her. The present action of the novel opens on the day of Dr Urbino's sudden death, in his eighties, while trying to retrieve his escaped parrot. His death allows Florentino to resume his courtship of Fermina. This time he is eventually successful and the story ends with them sailing up and down the Magdalena river, isolated by a cholera flag, on a boat owned by the steamship company of which Florentino is now the president. It ends, that is to say, with a romantic gesture for which it is hard to imagine the realistic outcome.

Cholera is, in short, a love story and it is handled as if the love motif of *Chronicle* had now expanded to require a book of its own. This is not just a

matter of space, or even of narrative proportion. The love story in *Chronicle* seemed to need a different mode of fiction and part of the interest of *Cholera* is not only to develop this possibility but implicitly to reflect upon and justify it. The relationship between the two books, in other words, is a striking instance of an increasingly evident feature of Márquez' *oeuvre*. One book seems partly to give birth to another which then goes on in turn to develop such a distinctive life of its own that it represents, if not a critique of the preceding work, then a significantly new vantage point from which to see it.

Cholera is most briefly, and perhaps most adequately, described as a love story. For the homely populism of the phrase is part of the book's own characteristic note. Yet the very familiarity and apparent simplicity of this phrase, indeed its nearness to cliché, present special problems of value and attention. That is why Márquez does not just seek to tell a popular love story; he sets out at the same time a sophisticated vindication of his subject and its form. This consists largely of a sustained meditation on both terms, 'love' and 'story', and on the relationship between them. But Márquez also places this meditation within a wide-ranging, if implicit, context of literary history. The book is full of narrative elements which are in the first instance simply part of the action but which at the same time provide a continuous, discreet means of self-reference on the part of the fiction by which it defines and locates itself against some of the prestigious achievements, and widely accepted criteria, of earlier modern literature.

The figure who provides the significant reference point here is Flaubert, although what is strictly at stake is not so much Flaubert himself as his myth. It is Flaubert's prestigious impact on modern literary thinking and most especially his ideal of an impersonally technical control by which the ineradicable human impulse to romance is contained within an ironically detached, aestheticised nihilism. The form is inseparable from the vision. It is appropriate as well as ironic that Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), with its witty and telling reaffirmation of the Flaubertian spirit, and its parenthetic swipe at 'magical realism', should have been published only a year before *Cholera* (1985). For *Cholera* offers a sustained, if side-long, challenge to the Flaubertian spirit.

I say 'side-long' because the direct allusions to Flaubert are the merest hints; anything more overt might have turned the novel into an elite intra-literary game rather than the popular and independently accessible work it actually is. Hence there is a passing reference to Florentino' Ariza's 'educación sentimental' / 'sentimental education'.¹ And the local hospital is named after St. Julian the Hospitaller (pp. 182, 337 / pp. 125, 234). But once

relationship with a parrot dies looking at it. And then we see the further significance of having at the centre of the story a study of the prosaic marriage of a provincial doctor and of his wife's suppressed romanticism. Of course, Dr Urbino and Fermina are a far cry from Charles and Emma Bovary but what the marriages have in common is their mundane representativeness as pointed up by the narrative in each case. The differences in personal quality are part of the force of the comparison. These differences challenge the basis of Flaubertian representativeness just as Márquez brings a fresh light to the Flaubertian use of the cliché.

In fact, indirection characterises the book more generally than just in the sidelong relation to Flaubert. Indirection has now become its dominant technical strategy and, we might almost say, its subject matter. For the narrative constantly sneaks up on the reader just as the character's emotions are constantly taking them by surprise. It is worth pausing on this aspect of the narrative before pursuing the implication of the Flaubertian allusions.

As has been noted several times, Márquez has always used techniques of indirection. The technical devices listed by Vargas Llosa are for the most part different forms of narrative obliqueness. In *Cholera*, however, these seem even more accentuated and humorously shared with the reader. For example, a favourite Marquesian effect has always been to introduce new material as if it were already known to the reader. Even an episode as important as the massacre of the strikers in *Hundred Years* is edged into the narrative in this way. Very often the effect, as in *Hundred Years*, can be to reinforce the spatialised chronology of the narrative. The story is told as if it were already within our possession. The technique can also disguise the importance of what is being introduced. To speak of something as if we already knew all about it is to imply that the topic does not need further explanation.

In *Cholera*, Márquez is less concerned to create the compressed and mythic spatialising of time which he sought in *Hundred Years* but he is still concerned to dramatise the interrelations of emotion and time. Time both changes, and is unable to change, Florentino's love. Like the colonel of *No One Writes*, Florentino affirms a Quixotic value by his heroic endurance. At the beginning of his love for Fermina, Florentino is unaware that it will not be consummated till nearly the end of their lives; that his life is going literally to enact what would normally be a poetic hyperbole. And in a complementary way, Dr Urbino does not know at the beginning of the novel that this is to be his last day. Here Márquez reverses the device of apparently foretelling Col. Aureliano Buendía's death by firing squad. The opening chapter has several references to the doctor's death which make us suppose it to be still a long way off, as in:

... dictó en la Escuela de Medicina todos los días de lunes a sábado, a las ocho en punto, hasta la víspera de su muerte. (p. 21)

... he taught at the School of Medicine every morning, from Monday through Saturday, at eight o'clock punctually, until the day before his death. (p. 12)

We are unlikely at first to realise that this is the day of his death and particularly since this account of *his* own day is being placed in evident contrast, and in apparent narrative subordination, to that of his friend, the aptly named Jeremiah de Saint-Amour, who has foretold and arranged his own death for that very day. In the same opening chapter, Dr Urbino's 'wife' and the parrot are also introduced with a comparably deceptive casualness. We do not know what principally to focus on in this opening chapter, just as the characters do not know what is going to prove most important in their lives. The whole narrative unfolds in a comparably ambiguous way creating a curious effect of leisurely suspense or suspenseful leisure. The central love affair is finally developed only at the very end of the novel and depends entirely on this anterior effect of constant distraction. The main body of the book is a narrative *tour de force* in simply filling the space between youth and age. In the abstract, this formula is a Beckettian one, but the Marquesian emphasis is on the preciousness rather than the emptiness of time. The book's delight in its own narrative bravura enacts its theme of enjoyment.

The mixture of suspense and leisure in the narrative is in the first instance, therefore, a way of enforcing a *carpe diem* recognition. But it does so by constantly revealing the processes by which everyday life blunts and distracts from this romantic wisdom. Proust saw habit as the great deadener. Márquez' narration constantly enacts an enjoyment of the momentary texture of experience while tripping us up if we are not on the alert for sudden changes. In this respect it reflects the emotional lives of the characters. The emotional life is volatile and it is overlaid with habit and rationalisation so that its subterranean current is often undetected. Or else when this does come to the surface, it is not understood. Fermina's response to her disgraced father's death is a case in point:

Fermina Daza no pudo reprimir un suspiro de alivio cuando le llegó la noticia de la muerte, y no le guardó luto para evitar preguntas, pero durante varios meses lloraba con una rabia sorda sin saber por qué cuando se encerraba a fumar en el baño, y era que lloraba por él. (pp. 308-9)

Fermina Daza could not repress a sigh of relief when the news of his death came and in order to avoid questions she did not wear mourning, but for several months she wept with dumb fury without knowing why when she locked herself in the bathroom to smoke, and it was because she was crying for him. (p. 215)

As has been seen in several previous works, Márquez frequently withholds omniscient insight into his characters. In this book he suggests more directly the unknowability of true feeling to simple introspection and the corresponding impossibility of summing up a relationship. This recognition is crucial to the portrayal of the Urbinos' marriage. Apart from anything else, the novel is a remarkable, if humorous, treatment of marriage but it is so because this marriage, and marriage in general, are both understood in the light of this fundamental recognition. In *Chronicle*, the narrator engaged the difficulty of understanding the mentality of a different culture. To an important extent, every long-term marriage develops its own culture which no outsider can ever be sure to have penetrated.

From one point of view the marriage of Dr Urbino and Fermina is merely a fifty-year interruption of Florentino's courtship. And the flashback technique of the narrative frankly treats it as such. Yet it also proves to be the route, and perhaps the necessary route, to the final romance, since both characters develop importantly through their experiences during this period. It is the marriage that gives Fermina her realistic appreciation of romance. And from this point of view it is important that the story should give the marriage its proper weight. It is not merely an obstacle. What we most come away with is a sense of its absolute resistance to any summary statement of its emotional quality or success. It is a very average sort of a marriage seen with clear, but not cynical, eyes. The relationship has been passionate, affectionate, boring, angry and desperate. But none of these sums it up. It presents no easy counter-term to the subsequent romance and it thereby gives a greater force, and testing, to the romance when it comes. In this novel, of course, the counter-term to 'romance' is not 'marriage' but 'age'. As the title suggests, the lovers triumph over time.²

In acknowledging this weight and complexity in the Urbinos' marriage, Márquez is affirming such a significance in marriage *per se*. For the specific internal chemistry of the Urbinos' marriage suggests something about the nature of marriage at large. In the classic tradition of romantic love, passion was necessarily adulterous.³ Marriage has always for that reason been a central theme of the novel because it represents the point of tension, for good or ill, between personal fulfilment and the requirements

of the social order. That was the structural function of marriage in the nineteenth-century novel of which *Madame Bovary* is a classic instance.⁴ But in this connection it is suggestive that, whereas Flaubert's title *Madame Bovary* refers to the former Emma Roualt purely by her married name, Fermina Daza, partly because of the different Hispanic conventions, continues to be referred to in the narrative by her personal and maiden names. In the twentieth century marriage has become more a matter of personal fulfilment, or otherwise, with less weight given to its meaning as a social institution. But wherever such a modern marriage continues to represent a lifetime commitment, it can actually embody the workings of the reality principle even more strongly and subtly than did the old sense of a social institution.

For the social institution represented an impersonal order to which an individual would give a personal inflection but which individuals did not create and could not significantly modify. The institution itself could therefore be held responsible for the happiness or otherwise of those inside it. But with the progressive weakening of the social institution, marriage has acquired an almost unique value in being a closed system in which two individuals live with the continuing, direct consequences of their own personalities. A lifetime's career in teaching, for example, may wreak untold damage, if only that of wasted time, on generations of students, but the perpetrator may remain happily unconscious because the students continually go away. Any comeback is only temporary. In a marriage, by contrast, the comeback is both short-term and long-term; it expresses itself at varying levels of consciousness; and above all it is inescapable as long as the marriage lasts.

The Urbino's marriage lasts into the new century and Márquez' presentation of it catches this intimate working of the reality principle as the interaction of two individuals defining and creating each other within a closed system. His humour brings out the structural dimension of this as well as the immediately personal, and often painful, feeling. At the same time, of course, the humour is a distancing device. The marriage is not the ultimate subject of the book. But he nonetheless communicates the rounded and complex workings of a marriage with an insider's knowledge in a way that I doubt Flaubert could. Flaubert could understand it very well in his own way, which was as an outsider. The bachelorhood of Flaubert is as relevant to his literary vision as is that of James or Turgenev. And by the same token, Márquez' own long marriage seems to have been an importantly formative precondition of his imaginative world just as, more obviously, D. H. Lawrence's was. Of course, this is not simply to attribute all such effects to marriage *per se*. It depends on the individuals' being open to its possibilities.

If Flaubert had married he would undoubtedly, like many another, have remained essentially a bachelor and he was wise not to inflict this fate on a woman. That was part of the sense in which he *did* understand the question very well from his own point of view.

There is something larger at stake, therefore, in the volatility of the Urbino marriage in contrast to the enclosure of the Bovary's. Of course, in an immediate sense the two marriages are incomparable because the authors are writing about different characters and for different purposes. But in a more significant underlying sense the characters are precisely the products of these different artistic and personal visions. With his French suspicion of feeling and romance, Flaubert sardonically traces the inextricability of the romantic impulse in the lives of his major characters and implicitly identifies its only proper expression as being in the art of the book itself. Márquez has a more English sense of the necessary, and proper, interaction of feeling and world so that the important question is rather to discriminate the quality of the feelings. It is as if Márquez were seeking to write something more like an English novel of moral and emotional growth while staying within Flaubert's terms. Only in this way could he make fully conscious and pertinent the challenge to the Flaubertian spirit. Henry James once remarked, after one of his visits to Flaubert's literary circle, how no one present was aware that George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* had just been published and how none of them would have understood the significance of the event if they had been told of it.⁵ Hence Márquez deliberately invokes Flaubert's terms and not least by keeping the general categories of 'reality' and 'romance' distinct in the reader's mind.

The text is at all times humorously aware both of the fundamental struggle between romance and reality and of their inextricability. This is apparent in the young Florentino's business letters:

... Florentino Ariza escribía cualquier cosa con tanta pasión, que hasta los documentos oficiales parecían de amor. Los manifiestos de embarque le salían rimados por mucho que se esforzara en evitarlo, y las cartas comerciales de rutina tenían un aliento lírico que les restaba autoridad. (p. 246)

... Florentino Ariza would write anything with so much passion that even official documents seemed to be about love. His bills of lading came out in rhyme however he tried to avoid it, and routine business letters had a lyrical air that undermined their authority. (p. 171)

And this initial statement of the theme is answered much later when the mature Florentino begins to have some success in wooing the widowed Fermina with a different kind of letter:

Era una carta de seis pliegos que no tenía nada que ver con ninguna otra que hubiera escrito alguna vez. No tenía ni el tono, ni el estilo, ni el sople retórico de los primeros años del amor, y su argumento era tan racional y bien medido, que el perfume de una gardenia hubiera sido un exabrupto. En cierto modo, fue la aproximación más acertada de las cartas mercantiles que nunca pudo hacer. (p. 424)

It was a six-page letter, quite unlike any he had ever written before. It did not have the tone, the style, or the rhetorical air of his early years of love, and his argument was so rational and measured that the scent of a gardenia would have been out of place. In a way, it was his closest approximation to the business letters he had never been able to write. (p. 296)

While we see that Florentino has changed, the continuity of the business letter theme allows us also to see that this later style is only a transposition of the same melody. The youthful romance is not transcended so much as transformed.

Márquez enjoys tracing the all-pervading nature of romance whereby it constantly subverts and assimilates its apparent opposites. At one point, as his lover Angeles Alfaro, the young girl who plays the cello naked, leaves on the boat for good, Florentino comes to recognise that 'se puede estar enamorado de varias personas a la vez, y de todas con el mismo dolor, sin traicionar a ninguna' (pp. 393-4) / '... one can be in love with several people at the same time, and feel the same anguish for each, without betraying any of them' (p. 274) Whereupon he remarks as a general dictum: "El corazón tiene más cuartos que un hotel de putas" / 'The heart has more rooms than a whorehouse'.⁶ He is momentarily shocked by this recognition but the narrative is not and, sure enough, '... no bien había desaparecido el barco en la línea de la horizonte, cuando ya el recuerdo de Fermina Daza había vuelto a ocupar su espacio total' / '... no sooner had the ship disappeared over the horizon, than the memory of Fermina Daza once again filled all his space'. Romantic love, it has already been remarked, is not essentially an ethical impulse. As Stendhal bluntly put it: 'True passion is a selfish thing'.⁷ The remark about the heart and the whorehouse is an earthy way of putting what

and multiple. The image is even perhaps a distant cousin of 'My Father's house has many mansions' and it is worth remarking in passing that the acceptance of multiplicity is an artistic, as well as a psychological, principle. The solitude of Melquiades, and of the 'lonely God' of *In Evil Hour*, arose not from the absence, so much as the even-handed multiplicity, of their relations with humankind at large.

That at least is the more negative side of the equation. But this book constantly suggests the more positive interrelations of 'love' and 'fiction' which may lurk in the common expression 'love story'. Love may be an archetypal subject of fiction partly because it has a strong element of the fictional in its own constitution. Hence, where the anti-romantic tradition from Cervantes through Flaubert to Nabokov has used the elements of fiction to expose romance, Márquez rather delights in the inextricable working of the fictional within love. Florentino, for example, becomes a scribe of love, drawing on his own feelings to compose love letters for others. He then finds himself conducting both sides of a correspondence which leads to a marriage and a child. This is the opposite joke to Flaubert's construction of a love conversation between Emma Bovary and Leon out of the clichés he sardonically amassed for his *Dictionary of Received Ideas*. In the case of Márquez' young couple, at least for all we know to the contrary, the genuineness of the feeling overrides and survives the artificiality of the occasion. The difference is partly an acceptance of language, even popular and clichéd language, as being independent of the feeling invested in it rather than as necessarily debasing the feeling in the expression. In so far as it remained within the Flaubertian orbit, much modern literature showed an unassuageable nostalgia for the genuinely popular touch. Joyce placed the common man at the centre of his work but could not be said simply to write for him. Márquez, for all his patrician spirit, has increasingly sought the popular note. This book is his most striking attempt to square the circle; to write a genuinely popular and accessible romance while maintaining, if only to challenge, the sophistication of a high modernist consciousness.

So, for example, as the final romance develops, Fermina becomes a fan of soap operas; a genre well known for its naïve equivocation with real life and its tendency to identify the performers with their parts. With a typical Marquesian effect, she listens to these interspersed with the real news which is how she hears the report of the elderly couple whose murder reveals them to have been clandestine lovers for forty years despite their each having a stable and fruitful marriage. The news item reduces Fermina to tears as the soap operas, which are designed to play on the feelings, do not, for it is in the fate of this couple that Fermina and Florentino recognise their potential selves. By intermingling the 'real' world of his fiction with that of soap opera

Márquez is not merely endorsing his heroine's love of soap operas, he is presenting his own story as a superior version of the genre. Superior, that is to say, but not condescending. Soap opera may be an undemanding form but Márquez feels no need to distance himself from it for the points of commonality are ultimately much greater than those of difference. In the 1980s Márquez was increasingly fascinated by the potential power of this phenomenally popular form. As he says, more people watch a soap opera in one night than have ever read his books.⁸

In short, Márquez is writing a popular romance which seeks to vindicate itself with a sophisticated literary historical self-consciousness. He fully acknowledges the projective and illusory nature of romantic love, what Stendhal called 'crystallisation'.⁹ The teenage love of Fermina and Florentino is ended abruptly when she suddenly sees his prosaic reality close up and feels 'el abismo del desencanto' (p. 155) / 'the abyss of disenchantment' (p. 106). This echoes the puzzled recognition of Proust's Swann that Odette, the object of his formerly consuming passion, was not even his 'type'. But just as Proust's novel goes on to absorb this Flaubertian recognition into a more complex aesthetic vision of 'paradise' as an imaginative construct won from time, so Florentino's obstinate persistence is to effect a comparable change in the nature of feeling through time and with the help of his fictional imagination.

Perhaps that is why Proust is mentioned, but only obliquely, in the text (p. 172 / p. 118). For although its tone and ambition are so different, this is Márquez' most Proustian novel. The Proustian experience is transposed into the key of Márquez. There were Proustian echoes, for example, in *Hundred Years* but they were seen mainly in a critical light as part of the Buendía's insidious nostalgia. In *Cholera*, on the other hand, romantic nostalgia is more sympathetically treated and indeed the increasing nostalgia of Fermina for her youth even before being newly won over by Florentino is an important, unconscious step towards their late-flowering love. Without the elaborate metaphysics of love and imagination through which Proust constructs his final paradisaical vision, their late affair has a comparable basis in recovered emotion and a consciously challenging transcendence of immediate reality. And likewise, as with Proust, there has been a conscious quest for the romantic experience on the part of the central male character while the true route to that experience proves to have been a process taking place largely outside of consciousness or will.

Márquez' carefully considered privileging of the romantic experience is further offset by his chosen counter-term of 'cholera'. Throughout his *oeuvre* Márquez has used the technique of parenthetical reference which Vargas Llosa calls the 'caja china' or Chinese box. In other words, he imparts crucial

information *a propos* of something else. In the early novellas especially, the horrors of the political situation were commonly revealed in this casual way, as in the remark that the funeral at the beginning of *No One Writes* was the first death by natural causes in ten years. The effect of this technique as used earlier was, of course, to increase our sense of such horrors. The present novel is likewise full of references to the civil wars and, one might think, the more tellingly so in so far as these references extend throughout the long lifetimes of the principal characters. But the actual effect is the reverse of this. We are rather struck by how little the essential lives of these characters are affected by political conditions and the long-standing nature of these conditions makes them appear to be rather one of the immovable conditions of life. This seems to be the principal function of the cholera motif. It metaphorically absorbs references to civil violence into a natural scourge; a scourge that might ideally be cured but is primarily to be understood as an aspect of the human condition at large. If this particular condition were removed, that is to say, the general nature of human existence would not be significantly altered. The supreme value of love would still be subject to time and mortality. This is the viewpoint from which Florentino's 'indiferencia política rayaba los límites de lo absoluto' (p. 388) / 'indifference to politics approached the limits of the absolute' (p. 270). Love, in short, will always be in the time of cholera; an implication which is clearer in the Spanish title where the 'times' of cholera are in an indefinite and recurrent plural.

But there is a further, more intrinsic, reason for this inescapability of conditions which is that love itself stands in no simple opposition to cholera. Indeed, it promotes cholera. For if the image of cholera assimilates war to human mortality at large, it also encompasses the dangerous fever of love. Hence, when Florentino is first in love,

... su madre se aterrorizó porque su estado no se parecía a los desórdenes del amor sino a los estragos del cólera. (p. 97)

... his mother was terrified because his condition did not seem like the pangs of love so much as the ravages of cholera. (p. 65)

And late in life, as her memory became confused, she

... solía decir: 'De lo único que mi hijo ha estado enfermo es del cólera.' Confundía el cólera con el amor, por supuesto, desde mucho antes de que se embrollara la memoria. (p. 320)

... used to say: 'The only disease my son ever had was cholera.'

She was confusing cholera with love, of course, long before her memory became muddled. (p. 222)

Not only is love in itself a form of cholera, but Florentino images his courtship as a military campaign. In other words, the apparently polar oppositions are increasingly complexified as a double action takes place. On the one hand, cholera is a collective and distancing image for all that stands in opposition to romance. In that respect it is potentially indiscriminating and sentimental. On the other hand, romantic love is also part of the disease. We have already noted that the romantic impulse is distinct from the ethical and it should be remembered that Florentino's affairs have cost the lives of two of the women concerned. Hence, when the lovers finally hit on the idea of protecting their romantic isolation by sailing under the flag of cholera there is a multilayered appropriateness in the gesture. They *are* in the grip of a dangerous contagion.

The novel's affirmation of romance, then, is in the face not just of a hostile or prosaic world, but of the darker side of romance itself. In this respect, the peculiar triumph of the book is its control of tone. It affirms a permanent and necessary impulse which it recognises can never be entirely lived and should perhaps not be attempted. In a truer and more penetrating sense than the phrase usually implies, this novel is a 'poem in prose'. It is not, that is to say, written in a 'poetic' prose. Rather the poetic affirmation of romance is set within a prose which refuses ever quite to assimilate it. As with *Chronicle*, the meaning of the work lies in the tension between its 'poetry' and its 'prose'. I say tension because in refusing quite to assimilate the romance it also protects it.

With a happy insight which encompasses the popular note of the book, Michael Wood has expressed something of this double effect by referring to this novel as Márquez' 'bolero'.¹⁰ In his early journalism, both while he was still based on the Caribbean coast and when suddenly removed to Bogotá, a city incidentally whose name is actively avoided in the novel, Márquez often wrote warmly of the popular song tradition of the coastal region. Wood's formula catches very well the positive spirit of Márquez' popular expression of the romantic impulse. But there is a body of musical allusion in the text of the novel itself which reinforces the literary historical allusions and gives his populism a challenging edge.

I have already indicated the significance of soap opera but more importantly there are many references in the novel to the characters' love of music and especially of opera proper. Music, for example, is supremely important to Doctor Urbino and he raises the topic early in his courtship of Fermina:

'Le gusta la música?'

Lo preguntó con una sonrisa encantadora, de un modo casual, pero ella no le correspondió.

'A qué viene la pregunta?' preguntó a su vez.

'La música es importante para la salud,' dijo er.

Lo creía de veras, y ella iba a saber muy pronto y por el resto de su vida que el tema de la música era casi una fórmula mágica que el' usaba para proponer una amistad, pero en aquella momento lo interpretó como una burla. (p. 178)

'Do you like music?'

'Why do you ask?' she asked in turn.

'Music is important for health,' he said.

He really believed this, and she was to know very soon, and for the rest of her life, that the subject of music was almost a magic formula that he used to propose friendship, but at that moment she took it for a joke. (p. 122)

Through Dr Urbino, Márquez introduces music as a touchstone in the book at large. Music seems to be a sustaining power of life itself even for this man whose profession is medicine. Fermina soon sympathises with this. She regularly accompanies him to the opera and the opening of *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* is one of their supreme joint memories of their honeymoon in Europe. Nonetheless, the unequal note of this opening is maintained in that the primary enthusiasm is always his. And there is a similar pattern of inequality with respect to Florentino. The great musical enthusiast in his life is his uncle, Leo XII, with 'su afición maniática por el *bel canto*' (p. 384) / 'his maniacal love of *bel canto*' (p. 268). Florentino sympathises with, rather than actually participates in, this taste. Hence 'se conmovió' (p. 391) / 'he was moved' (p. 272) when his uncle sang *addio alla vita* from *Tosca* to celebrate Florentino's assuming the presidency of the river boat company but he would not think to join in.

The musical references point to a realm or value that largely escapes verbal expression. This stands partly in ludicrous contrast to reality, as when uncle Leo, as a would-be Dionysus, loses his false teeth trying to impose the power of music on the creatures of the jungle. Yet it is also partly transformative as in the early incident of the concert in which Dr Urbino, having been scandalised by the revelation of his dead friend's long-standing mistress, is brought to show 'lealtad con la mujer que había repudiado cinco horas antes,' (p. 65) / 'loyalty to the woman he had repudiated five hours earlier' (p. 42). His change of heart is effected more by the influence of music

than by the intercession of his wife. The whole episode of the concert plays on the interweaving of the music with the emotional and social reality of the occasion.

Music appears throughout the book as the ambivalent but indispensable power of romance. And since opera in particular is both a musical and a dramatic genre, it is obliged to spell out formally its remove from realist terms and in doing so it speaks for the novel too. What an opera might express, the novel vindicates and protects. The doubleness is embodied in the different kinds, and degrees, of musical appreciation seen in the characters. It is evident that Dr Urbino, the connoisseur and promoter of opera, has a rational and sublimative relation to it, while Florentino's uncle, in keeping with the more romantic tenor of his life, actually sings. By contrast, Fermína and Florentino are sympathetically associated with music and opera without being enthusiasts or direct participants. This is because they ultimately wish to live out its values in reality. To make it possible for them to do so, the novel adjusts its own imaginative lens, its implicit contract with the reader, by means of the opera theme.

This can be seen by the exercise of imagining a passage of Márquez verbally unchanged but understood in a Flaubertian spirit. Borges' Pierre Menard would have us read the text of *Don Quixote* to yield a modern, non-Cervantean meaning.¹¹ That was a difficult feat which even Menard failed to achieve. But it is relatively easy to imagine the following passage as written by Flaubert:

La temporada se abrió con una compañía francesa de ópera cuya novedad era un arpa en la orquesta, y cuya gloria inolvidable era la voz inmaculada y el talento dramático de una soprano turca que cantaba descalza y con anillos de pedrerías preciosas en los dedos de los pies. A partir del primer acto apenas si se veía el escenario y los cantantes perdieron la voz por el humo de las tantas lámparas de aceite de corozo, pero los cronistas de la ciudad se cuidaron muy bien de borrar estos obstáculos menudos y de magnificar los memorables. Fue sin duda la iniciativa más contagiosa del doctor Urbino, pues la fiebre de la ópera contaminó hasta los sectores menos pensados de la ciudad, y dio origen a toda una generación de Isoldas y Otelos, y Aidas y Sigfridos. (pp. 73-4)

The season opened with a French opera company whose novelty was a harp in the orchestra and whose unforgettable glory was the impeccable voice and dramatic talent of a Turkish soprano who

sang barefoot and wore rings set with precious stones on her toes. After the first act the stage was hardly to be seen and the singers lost their voices because of the smoke from so many palm oil lamps, but the chroniclers of the city took care to erase these minor obstacles and to magnify what was memorable. Without a doubt it was Dr Urbino's most contagious initiative, for opera fever infected the most unexpected sections of the city and gave birth to a whole generation of Isoldes and Otellos and Aidas and Siegfrieds. (p. 48)

Márquez' vision here is no less ironical than Flaubert's would have been, but with a different kind of irony. In Flaubert, for example; we would know how to read the 'impeccable' voice of the Turkish soprano but in Márquez we cannot be so sure. If the 'chroniclers of the city' are adjusting their verbal lenses so, in his own way, is Márquez. Like Dr Urbino looking on the life of the same city, he loves it enough 'para verla con los ojos de la verdad' (p. 167) / 'to see it with the eyes of truth' (p. 115). Where a classic English novelist, like George Eliot, would say you can *only* see the human truth *when* looking with the eyes of love, Márquez is somewhere between that stance and the Flaubertian. And, once again, the final imagery of disease in the passage links this ambivalent complex of feeling to both the central motifs of cholera and romance. Dr Urbino, the rational and effective campaigner against the cholera, has himself been responsible for this 'contagious initiative'.

The fact that we can so readily perform the imaginary exercise of reading the passage in the spirit of Flaubert arises partly from the fact that opera has been a recurrent motif by which both realist and modernist writers have defined their own generic forms. In *Madame Bovary* itself, Emma's readiness to be emotionally caught up by a performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor* is treated with crushing irony. On the other hand, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and several consciously modernist works of Thomas Mann, not only present operatic experience in a more positive light, they use it as a partial model, or criterion, for their own conscious departures from realist form.

As a reading of Joyce, and of *Cholera* itself, reminds us, opera at the turn of the century was a highly popular form; and hence the desire of some of these earlier writers to distance themselves from it. It is significant that opera has acquired a new popularity, and a new kind of popularity, precisely over the period of Márquez' career for the late twentieth-century popularity of opera has been part of a transformation in the understanding of the form itself. That it now regularly attracts great theatrical directors reflects a more serious and integral understanding of its nature as musical drama. In the early 1960s it was possible to think of the middle part of the nineteenth

century as a relatively weak period for drama. This judgement may indeed be a fair one but in making it one would now have to recognise that opera was one of the forms into which the dramatic imagination of the period went. And it could strike important notes of political feeling as was recognized by the crowds who drew Verdi's hearse through the streets singing the Israelites' chorus from *Nabucco*. That is why Márquez' late twentieth-century novel, set around the turn of the century, is able to unite in its operatic theme both the popular note of the earlier period and the generic appreciation of recent decades. A way of expressing the reservation about *Chronicle* would be to say that its love theme seemed to require the insertion of a different mode of fiction which it could only with tact and difficulty contain. As Márquez pulls out the stops for the return of Bayardo with his bag of unopened letters we might think of this, with some ironic intent, as his letter aria. In *Cholera*, by contrast, the whole work is made generically and consciously of a piece with its affirmation of romance. In a larger way, the whole literary movement of which Márquez is a part may be associated with the renewed, sophisticated appreciation of opera.

It is also no accident perhaps that the 'operatic' moment in *Chronicle* should have involved Angela's letters. For the letters which played a subordinate role in the earlier work have become a dominant motif, and narrative means, in the later one. Angela's letters were her means of expressing an emotional truth for which there was no other outlet. A comparable use of a letter occurs with the death of Dr Urbino's father, Dr Marco Aurelio Urbino. This imposing public figure is not really known even to his own family until they read his posthumous letter 'de amor febril' (p. 170) / 'of feverish love' (p. 116) written to them on his death bed. This letter shows his given name to be indeed an appropriate one yet 'nunca antes de esa carta se le había mostrado tal como era en cuerpo y alma, por pura y simple timidez' (pp. 170-1) / 'before this letter he had never revealed himself body and soul out of pure and simple shyness' (p. 117).

But the letters of Florentino are a central narrative device defining the emotional ambivalence, and the fictional bracketing, of the romantic experience. They are a way of balancing and interrelating the kinds of truth and falsehood in romance. His early letters, along with Fermina's subsequent rejection of him, suggest the dangers of delusion. Yet in the longer term the impulse of these letters is vindicated when he finds a newly realistic mode of expression. He has to learn that the bubble of romance bursts when its truth is too crudely counted on, or literalised. Fermina is then so struck by the wisdom of these later letters, that she decides to keep them as a series and to think of them as a book. If this is a hint towards the traditional device of the

... becomes the book we are reading, then it is a

reminder of the partial origin of modern realist fiction in the epistolary novel of the eighteenth century.

In the eighteenth century, this device was usually a way of exploring levels of sincerity in the character's self-presentation while keeping the whole form within that 'air of reality' which Henry James was to see as the hallmark of the novel tradition as he inherited it. There was a close homology between the narrative literalism of such fiction and the literalistic understanding of the ethics of sentiment in the same period.¹² If Márquez returns to some such value in the letter as mediating between the narrative form and the emotional ethic of the book, it is not by using the letters themselves as the narrative medium. The letters are always firmly placed within his own third-person narrative frame. Coming at the other end of the realist tradition, Márquez needs to use the letters not to reinforce the reality effect of his own narrative but to provide protective enclaves from such an effect. Only through that route does he then provide an implicit model for the ultimate meaning of his own story. Like both the opera and Florentino's letters, the novel creates a privileged but necessary space.

In sum, this novel vindicates its vision of romantic love through a constant, glancing texture of literary and cultural allusion. Yet the ultimately important emphasis has to be that, in keeping with Márquez' fundamental populism, these allusions never become too self-conscious, or detached from the narrative subject. The novel can be read innocently without being misread. The apparent casualness of the narrative is important, not just as a concealment of art: it is an aspect of the vision. The narrative bravura is part of the point. Henry James, D.H. Lawrence and Ivan Turgenev, while seeing the power of Flaubert, all saw something ultimately stultifying in the resolute imposition of his artistic will. For James and Turgenev particularly, we might say that the tragic vision of Flaubert was only indirectly revealed in his works and was most truly and fully embodied in the Sisyphean artistry these works imply. Flaubert himself was the true tragic hero of his oeuvre. By contrast, while showing a complete narrative mastery, Márquez creates the maximum open-endedness both of tone and of narrative resolution. The necessity and impossibility of romance are embodied in the teasing, flirtatious quality of the story-telling. Whereas the early fiction frequently had a sub-textual self-consciousness, this late work in particular puts its fictional play on the surface.

The critical danger, in seeking to make these effects explicit, is of breaking the butterfly upon a wheel. The glancingness is all. It may be helpful as a final emphasis, therefore, to give some examples of moments in which the playfully open-ended spirit of narrative self-consciousness in the work leaves the reader wondering how much to read into it at any given

moment. The general spirit of the work creates a constant flicker of possibility, a kind of spray where the surface of its medium meets ours, such that one cannot be sure whether one has actually been splashed or has just imagined it. The meaning seems to lie more in the possibility than in the specific interpretation.

Are we, for example, to see a formal joke in the following incident which has little necessity from a purely narrative point of view?

Alguna vez probo apenas una tisana de manzanilla, y la devolví con una sola frase: 'Esta vaina sabe a ventana.' Tanto ella como las criadas se sorprendieron, porque nadie sabía de alguien que hubiera bebido una ventana hervida, pero cuando probaron la tisana tratando de entender, entendieron: sabía a ventana. (p. 324)

Once he barely tasted some chamomile tea and returned it, with the single remark: 'This stuff tastes of window.' She and the servants were equally surprised because nobody had ever heard of anyone drinking boiled window, yet when they tried the tea in an effort to understand, they understood; it tasted of window. (pp. 226-7)

The reader here is in the same position as Fermina and the servants except that they can actually resolve the matter by tasting the tea. Fiction, like language itself, requires a consensual acceptance of external reality although fiction is also the pre-eminent medium through which the boundaries of consensus can be explored and renegotiated. At the level of language Dr Urbino's remark seems almost surrealist yet at the level of the fictional reality it turns out to have an accurately referential truth. Since we cannot taste the tea for ourselves, the remark retains for us its flickering ambiguity. It is strictly a play with the order of discourse itself, yet it is the more playful in being barely emergent from the order of the subject-matter. Behind the joke about the tea lies Dr Urbino's objection when food is not prepared with love. As was remarked in the preceding chapter, John Bayley would make this a fundamental principle of literary creation.

Or again, Florentino seems to incorporate a metafictional wit in the episode with the mirror. On one occasion during his fifty-year wait, he gets to see Fermina for several hours from fairly close up by the lucky placing of a mirror in a restaurant. He subsequently buys the mirror although its antique frame costs him dear. He is not interested in the frame but simply in the mirror which has contained the image of the beloved. Florentino is

his romantic extravagance by reversing the traditional image of

realist vision. Once again, the episode is carried by its charm and can undoubtedly be read without such literary historical associations but part of its underlying toughness lies in its carrying the challenge into the enemy's territory. After all, even when used as a metaphor of realism, the image in the mirror is strictly a virtual one. The function of fiction at any time is not passive. It does not merely reflect but makes us reflect, and all reality is in some sense chosen.

The lightness of touch bears equally on the running comparison with Flaubert. Márquez is not necessarily placing *Cholera* on a footing with *Madame Bovary*. Indeed, the tact of the novel lies in its nice judgement of its own relative weight. Nor is it a question of displacing Flaubert's vision, as if proving it 'wrong'. Works of fictional imagination don't stand in that sort of relation to each other. It is rather a matter of taking a classic metaphysical vision, as incorporated in an equally classic formal mode, and using this to define a contrary one.

In fact, the danger here would be of allowing the order of allusion to take over too much so that the book becomes merely parasitical on an earlier one. There is a recognisable late twentieth-century fictional sub-genre of the rewritten classic. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is the most distinguished example, and *Flaubert's Parrot* a close runner-up. Márquez' allusiveness, however, steers well clear of this. His vision is there very much in its own right while using allusion, humorously and parenthetically, to define and place itself.

However, if this novel ends with his central characters challenging their social world and the very conditions of existence by their final, and as it were eternal, trip on the Magdalena river, this points towards the different world of Márquez' next novel, in which the weightiness of the historical subject could hardly be more ambitious.

NOTES

1. *El amor en el tiempos del colera* (Barcelona: Bruguera, 1985) p. 100; *Love in the Time of Cholera*, trans. Edith Grossman (London: Cape, 1988) p. 67.
2. Germaine Greer sees Márquez' whole treatment of the theme as 'ageist' although her reading seems humourlessly literalistic to me. See *The Change* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1991) pp. 364-8.
3. See Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); also trans. by Montgomery Belgion as *Passion and Society* (London: Faber, 1940).
4. For an extended discussion of this theme see Tony Tanner, *Adultery and the Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).
5. Letter to Alice James, Feb. 22, 1876. *Henry James: Letters*, ed. Leon Edel, Vol. II (London: Macmillan, 1975) pp. 29-30.

6. The published translation gives 'My heart...' but it is clear that Florentino is making a general, aphoristic reflection.

7. Stendhal, *Scarlet and Black*, trans. Margaret R. B. Shaw (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953) p. 149.

8. See the interview with Márquez, 'Of Love and Levitation', *TLS*, 20–26 October 1989, pp. 1151–65.

9. See *On Love*, trans. P. Sidney Woolf and C. N. Sidney Woolf (London: Duckworth, 1915). See especially chapter I, sections VI and XII.

10. In a lecture 'García Márquez and the Modernist Tradition' given at a conference on 'Gabriel García Márquez', Birkbeck College, London on 30 September 1988. The interest in popular music of the coastal region is a recurrent feature of Márquez' early journalism. See also Márquez' comment on *Hundred Years* when first working on it: 'It's like a bolero', *Fragrance*, p. 71.

11. 'Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote', *Labyrinths*, pp. 62–71.

12. I have discussed the relationship of sentimentalist ethics and fictional form in *The Sentiment of Reality* (London: Unwin, 1983).

DAVID BUEHRER

"A Second Chance on Earth":
*The Postmodern and the Post-apocalyptic in
 García Márquez's Love in the Time of Cholera*

On a day like today, my master William Faulkner said in this very place, "I refuse to admit the end of mankind." I should not feel myself worthy of standing where he once stood were I not fully conscious that, for the first time in the history of humanity, the colossal disaster which he refused to recognize thirty-two years ago is now simply a scientific possibility. Face to face with a reality that overwhelms us, one which over man's perceptions of time must have seemed a utopia, tellers of tales who, like me, are capable of believing anything, feel entitled to believe that it is not yet too late to undertake the notion of a minor utopia: a new and limitless utopia for life wherein no one can decide for others how they are to die, where love really can be true and happiness possible, where the lineal generations of one hundred years of solitude will have at last and for ever a second chance on earth.

Gabriel García Márquez,
 Nobel Address, 1982.
 Trans. Richard Cardwell

In John Barth's seminal 1980 essay on postmodernist fiction, "The Literature of Replenishment," he singles out Gabriel García Márquez and his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as quintessential examples of the postmodern genre. For Barth, what distinguishes García Márquez's fiction is its "synthesis of straightforwardness and artifice, realism and magic and

Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations

Gabriel García Márquez's
Love in the Time of Cholera

Edited and with an introduction by
Harold Bloom
Sterling Professor of the Humanities
Yale University

2005



CHELSEA HOUSE
PUBLISHERS