The most casual reader of García Márquez notes his fondness for numbers. There are one hundred years of solitude, and in the novel of the same name the rain pours down on Macondo for exactly four years, eleven months, and two days. A traveler circles the earth sixty-five times in sixty-five minutes. Gargantuan eaters consume for breakfast eight quarts of coffee, thirty eggs, and the juice of forty oranges. The numbers call up an air of legend and precision that mildly mocks the idea of precision. But numbers can also suggest patience, an intimacy with the slow seepage of time. Closer to the numerical flavor of Love in the Time of Cholera, the sad and long-suffering hero of No One Writes to the Colonel (El coronel no tiene quien le escriba) (1961), we are told, every counted minute of the seventy-five years of his life needed, we are told, every counted minute of the seventy-five years of his life to arrive at the simple word that summarizes both his defeats and his dignity, his refusal to accept the unacceptable. He is a courteous, old-fashioned man and has earlier rebuked a group of local youths for swearing. At last, however, nothing short of rude anger will do. The simple word is shit, Mierda.

Love in the Time of Cholera ends on a milder phrase, but one that has been similarly stored, one that similarly reflects an arithmetic of obstinacy and concentration. A captain asks how long he can be expected to keep his boat going up and down a tropical river, and the answer he receives has been...
brewing for "fifty-three years, seven months, and eleven days and nights." It is an answer that looks forward as well as backward: "Forever" (Todo la vida).

It takes the reader some time to get here too, and on my first reading of this novel I found myself counting pages now and then, the way the characters count years and months. Good stories are best told slowly, Thomas Mann says, but it is possible to have too much of a good thing, and Mann may not be the ideal witness in such a cause. García Márquez really needs the snail's pace he sets, I think, but we need a little patience to understand his need. Or some of us do: the book's huge commercial success suggests that slow telling is making a comeback.

The book begins with a corpse, and the scent of almonds that indicates death by cyanide. "It was inevitable," the doctor thinks who is examining the body, "the scent of bitter almonds always reminded him of the fate of unrequited love." Inevitable, fate, love: we are reading the opening sentence of the book, and we seem already to be deep in an old-fashioned romantic narrative lure. What is inevitable is not that deaths by cyanide should be those of lovers but that the doctor should think of such deaths. This one in fact is the first cyanide death he can recall that has nothing to do with love, unrequited or requited. It is not an exception that proves the rule but an exception that proves the rule.

The corpse is that of Jeremiah de Saint-Amour, an escaped convict who had decided long ago that he did not want to live beyond that age. "It passed through his head, as it does in Garcia Márquez's other books, this time in the shape of corpses floating down river toward the sea, a strange, unaccountable sight, "for there were no more wars or epidemics." Like many other words in this book, and in the historical Latin America it evokes, this clause is both true and deceptive. There are no more epidemics, and we are near the end of the novel. But cholera still exists, even if only endemically, so the time of cholera does continue. There is nothing going on that can really be called a war, unless we insist on the "larval wars that governments were bent on hiding unless we insist on the "larval wars that governments were bent on hiding with distracted decrees." But there is random killing, a plague as lethal as any other.

The time of the novel is the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. A recent event is a showing of the movie All Quiet on the Western
Front, which was released in 1939 but may have reached Latin America a little later. More precisely, the present of the novel is just under two years in the 1930s, when all the principal characters are quite old, a lot older than Jeremiah de Saint-Amour, and have no thought of taking his view of things; and there are extensive flashbacks that give us the youth and backgrounds and long lives of these people. The book has been compared to a Naturalist novel and to a photograph album. It's a lot more like the second than like the first, but we might like to pause over the idea of a sophisticated, affectionate Naturalist novel, an evocation of an old, grubby, rigid world for its own sad and charming sake and not for any grim demonstration it might permit. This is a place where an old-fashioned mother can castigate even the contents of her daughter-in-law's sleep: “A decent woman cannot have that kind of dream.” The doctor, returning to the city from a long stay in Europe, can enough to look at it straight:

“How noble this city must be,” he would say, “for we have spent four hundred years trying to finish it off and we still have not succeeded.”

From the paupers' cemetery, one can look down on

the entire historic city, the broken roofs and the decaying walls, the rubble of fortresses among the brambles, the trail of islands in the bay, the hovels of the poor around the swamps, the immense Caribbean.

This is not a romantic vision, but it is a way one might talk of home. There is a variety of suspense García Márquez has very much made his own. It consists in giving away conclusions and leaving the reader to guess at how they are reached. The trick characteristically involves removing most of the plausible narrative props, making us dizzyly wonder whether already reached conclusions actually can be reached. It is another way of playing with destiny. Liberty creeps into unlikely human spaces, even what has happened seems doubtful, and hindsight, surely the safest of all forms of prophecy, turns risky. Thus we know in this novel that the couple I have just evoked do not marry when young, since we first meet them at the ludicrous death of her husband, the doctor. The suitor is now seventy-six, the woman is seventy-two. He has been waiting, since she first turned him down, for “fifty-one years, nine months, and four days”—a little less than two years short of the final count we have already seen. We learn of their courtship, his numerous affairs, her marriage to the doctor, the doctor's single, scared infidelity, the lovers' happy, belated, foolish reconciliation, old skeletons still able to dance and get frightened at their feelings—though then we are told, in a fine phrase, that they wonder what they are doing “so far from their youth,” and that their relation is “beyond love,” because it is “beyond the pitfalls of passion, beyond the brutal mockery of hope and the phantoms of disillusion”—desenganó, one of those great Spanish words we find both in Baroque poems and lingering as the names of modern streets and lanes, caught up again in an ancient rhetoric of suspicion of the world. What we can’t picture, what we must follow page by page, is how any of this can actually come about, how obstacles are removed, how people can bring themselves to say and act as they must to ensure the named developments. García Márquez’s formality is impeccable here, a slow joke in its own right. He almost always refers to the doctor by his full name and title, for example: Dr. Juvenal Urbino. His wife invariably appears under her Christian name and maiden name, Fermina Daza; her stubborn lover under his Christian and family name, Florentino Ariza. No modern intimacies of appellation.

The text is not solemn, there are sly gags, fantastic images, and abrupt violations: a group of brothers called after popes (Leon XII, Pius V, and so on); a baby carried around in a bird cage; a woman discovered in adultery and murdered by her husband without a word; a ghost who waves from the river bank; a black doll that silently, eerily grows, becoming too big for its dress and its shoes; a suicide for love (with laudanum, though, another blow to the doctor’s theory). But the prose is unruffled, affects not to notice anything untoward. This is a stylistic act, of course, but the chief feature of the act is its discretion. Irony would be too strong a word for the almost invisible humor, the scent of skepticism in the following sentence: “He was a perfect husband: he never picked up anything from the floor, or turned out a light, or closed a door.” Such a husband is perfect because there is no chink between him and the myth.

The time of cholera, which is over and not over, is the time of romantic love. Love is like cholera, we are told several times in the book—even its physical symptoms, dizziness, nausea, fever, and the rest, can be the same. Like cholera, love is mortal, exclusive (because it separates us from our world) and undiscriminating (because it doesn’t care what kind of victims it gets). García Márquez is fond of telling interviewers that the book he took with him when he first left Colombia for Europe was Defoe’s Journal of the Plague Year—a story that, apart from doubtless being true, suggests an interest in communities doomed to clinical isolation. The community here is the teeming Caribbean city, not the backland of Macondo, but it is also the community of all those, in Latin America and elsewhere, who are perhaps
too keen on morbid metaphors of love. Love is a disease in this book, and
this is a romantic novel; but the disease is one of the self-deluding, stubborn
will, a fruit of mythology and obstinacy rather than any fate beyond
ourselves. Indeed the word itself becomes subject to a kind of creative
disintegration or dissemination. At first and most prominently used to evoke
the unique, histrionic, weepy passion, the endless topic of soap operas and
their predecessors, the kind of the thing that drives people to death through
cyanide, it gradually attaches itself to quite various human activities and
affections: a long marriage, for example, begun without love, and then
finding it and losing it and finding it; the “emergency love,” the “hurried
love” peddled in brothels; the “loveless love” of desperate people; love for a
city, as we have seen; the love of children, love of food, love for life. The first
of Florentino Ariza’s many mistresses teaches him that “nothing one does in
bed is immoral if it helps to perpetuate love.” Florentino Ariza himself thinks
at one point, “My heart has more rooms than a whorehouse,” a secular twist
on the rumored many mansions of heaven. The heart: home of sentiment
and dream and nostalgia, but also of more erratic, unpredictable emotions,
the place where life itself can always turn up and surprise us. Love is the
name for attractive and disreputable impulses as well as for all the noble
enchantments and illusions, the engaños and encantos with which we garnish
our insufficiently romantic times. If love were always and only a disease, it
could only be because life is. Writers have suggested this, but García
Márquez is not one of those writers.

In interviews García Márquez has described Love in the Time of Cholera
not as like a bolero but as “practically a telenovela, a soap opera” and also as
a nineteenth-century feuilleton, the serial novel that was the soap opera’s
literary antecedent. It is important to see that García Márquez’s novel is not
a pastiche of these genres, and still less a parody. It doesn’t criticize or
condescend to the genres, it seeks, as Stephen Minta has very well said, for
“the truths about emotional life which ... are ... solidly embedded in the
language of the popular imagination.” And yet. The clichés are clichés,
however much we may feel at home among them. What are we to do with a
discourse that is certainly straight-faced but not entirely straight; something
less than ironic; certainly not figurative, indeed devoted to the meticulous
reconstruction of a historical world, but still not entirely literal?

There is an answer, I think, suggested chiefly by the behavior of the
characters in the novel itself, but first we need to look a little more closely at
the stealth of García Márquez’s style, and his relation to his soapy sources.
There is much discussion of reading in the book, of the doctor’s European
culture (he is a fan of Loti and Anatole France), of poetry competitions, and
about all of the sentimental romances and poems through which so many
people conduct so much of their imaginative lives—versos y folletines de
lágrimas, “verses and tearful serialized love stories.” Florentino Ariza
immerses himself in books, reads everything from Homer to the lousiest
local poets:

But he made no distinctions; he read whatever came his way, as if
it had been ordained by fate, and despite his many years of
reading he still could not judge what was good and what was not
in all that he read. The only thing clear to him was that he
preferred verse to prose, and in verse he preferred love poems.

García Márquez’s implication, I take it, is not exactly that this is an ideal
reader, but that there are many worse, and that serious, critical readers are
often the worst of all.

The language of the book itself, then, is that of fate and broken hearts
and eternal passions; of “mists of grief” and the “quicksand” of old age; of a
“private hell” and “the wasteland of ... insomniá”; of blood pounding in the
veins and “night eternal over the dark sea.” Yet the effect, as I have suggested, is
neither pastiche nor straight imitation but a form of homage to popular
literature, a friendly glance at its often lurid prose. And the prose here is not
itself lurid, in spite of the phrases I’ve just quoted; it is stately, a graceful
orchestration of old verbal tunes. What distinguishes this novel from the
sentimental work it continuously alludes to is not irony or distance but a
certain persistent lucidity. This is not a tearful text; just scrupulously loyal to
tearful stories, only occasionally murmuring words such as “fallacy” and
“illusion.” If it moved faster it would have to judge summarily, settle issues,
could hardly avoid the recourse to irony. As it is, time and our patience
situate the events and the characters.

Fermina Daza when young, for example, is suddenly sure that what she
thought was love is nothing of the kind. She looks at the suitor she has not
seen for some time and feels not the passion she has been diligently
nurturing but only an “abyss of disenchantment,” desencanto, another of those
great Spanish names for cheated desire. Is she right, or is her disenchantment
just ordinary disappointment, of the kind lovers often feel after absences?
She is probably wrong, and the text, much later, hints that she is. For the
moment, though, she is sure she is right, acts on her feeling, condemns her
suitor to a lifetime’s despair; more, since she is not a person who can admit
mistakes, she will in her own terms always have been right, whatever shifts of
feeling may take place in what this novel calls her heart. When García
Márquez writes of the “revelation” she experiences, and of the “correctness”
of her decision, the words are simple and clear, but several meanings have
 piled up in them. They point, among other things, to a conviction that alters reality and then takes that alteration as proof of the conviction's justice. A form of destiny. Conversely, Florentino Ariza thinks of himself as doggedly faithful to

of his apparent infidelities doesn't reach her.

The characters in fact are better guides to meaning than the narrator; better readers of their world and better teachers of reading. Like the characters in García Márquez's earlier novels, indeed like all of us, they are subject to bad luck. We could any of us fall from a ladder and die while trying to rescue a parrot. But they are not, these characters, the victims of fate, prisoners of an author's plot. They write their own lines; they choose their own interpretations of the lines of others; and they are very skillful at both activities.

Florentino Ariza, as a young man of eighteen, brings his first love letter to Fermina Daza. She is sitting sewing outside her house, under the trees, and this is how the occasion is described:

He took the letter out of his inside jacket pocket and held it before the eyes of the troubled embroiderer, who had still not dared to look at him. She saw the blue envelope trembling in a hand petrified with terror, and she raised the embroidery frame so he could put the letter on it, for she could not admit that she had noticed the trembling of his fingers. Then it happened [Entonces ocurrió]: a bird shook itself among the leaves of the almond trees, and its droppings fell right on the embroidery. Fermina Daza moved the frame out of the way, hid it behind the chair so that he would not notice what had happened [lo que había pasado], and looked at him for the first time, her face aflame. Florentino Ariza was impassive as he held the letter in his hand and said, “It's good luck.” She thanked him with her first smile and almost snatched the letter away from him.

If this had been a passage in Flaubert, the birdshit would have been a comment on life and love, a sort of visual epigram; if this had been a telenovela, the birdshit wouldn't have appeared at all, would have been edited out or simply not thought of. The interesting point is that Flaubert and the soap opera are in agreement about the incompatibility of birdshit and
his valuation. And not, oddly, on the narrator's either, since the narrator's voice becomes a contribution not a summary. This fellow is an anciano serio, sure, but he's also more than that.

The characters take each other seriously but not always literally; they know what clichés mean but can't always say. When Florentino and Fermina get together, at the end of novel, she expresses her surprise that in all the years of their separation—fifty-three years, seven months, eleven days—he has not been known to have a woman, and this in a city where gossip knows everything "even before it's happened." This is too good a chance to miss, a place for the bolero to blossom. "I've remained a virgin for you," Florentino says, Es que me he conservado virgen para ti. The likely options for a writer here seem to be the soggy score, a prose of soaring violins, or a knowing wink to the reader: sentimentality or parody. What García Márquez gives us is the character's skepticism. And her belief. And invites in us at the same time a complex implied respect for both characters. Fermina doesn't claim, although she knows in which he said it," el coraje con que lo dijo.

Fermina is not moved by the thought or the sentiment of the florid claim, although she knows Florentino's emotion to be deep and genuine, in spite of the banality and untruth of the words. She likes the unashamed way in which he assumes the language of romance, the fiction no one believes in, no one needs to believe in, since its function is not to transmit a declared meaning but to allow certain feelings and prowess to circulate. It is her sense of this function, indeed, which causes Fermina to doubt the truth of Florentino's claim—she doesn't have the information the reader has. "She would not have believed it in any event, even if it had been true, because his love letters were composed of similar phrases whose meaning mattered less than their brilliance," que no valían por su sentido sino por su poder de deslumbramiento. Their dazzle. She isn't dazzled, but she likes the dazzle; she can read the dazzle. I think of a remark of Chomsky's in which he expresses surprise that linguists (or anyone) should think of conveying information as the characteristic business of language. "Human language can be used to inform or mislead, to clarify one's own thoughts or to display one's cleverness, or simply for play." And for much else.

The implication here reverses one of modernism's major claims about language and replaces it with something a good deal more optimistic and democratic. Pound quite explicitly and most of the modernists implicitly associate debased or banal language with debased or banal thinking. The kindest option is a sort of uneasy sympathy. When we leaf through the sentimental prose of the Gertie Macdowell chapter of Ulysses, we may feel sorry she has no better means of expressing her longings than the trashy idioms of what she reads, we hardly feel at all that she has expressed her longings, still less that these trashy idioms could in any way become an adequate or lively vehicle for them. Yet this is just what García Márquez is proposing, and the move, oddly, brings him close to Henry James, a writer he doesn't mention and perhaps hasn't read. James lends his intelligence to his characters in just the way García Márquez does not because he has more intelligence but because his intelligence is different and will translate into a more discursive currency. He speaks the reader's language, while the characters speak only their own. Or to put that less obscurely, Fermina doesn't need fancy words, or any words, for her understanding of how language works—she merely needs to know how to act on her understanding. Her understanding is very subtle, however; and so the suggestion goes, is the understanding of many apparently unsophisticated or unliterary people. The writer needs all the subdety (and discretion) he/she can muster to get anywhere near it.

There are two kinds of time in García Márquez—at least two. There is the magical, stagnant, modernist time, which scarcely seems to pass; and there is the cumulative, devouring time, which is always passing. Both times are constantly in play—as we see in the famous image of the wheel and the axe in One Hundred Years of Solitude, the wheel turning in what looks like cyclical time while the axe wears away according to linear succession—but not always equally accentuated. We might contrast the time of the Buendías, for example, with the time of the Colonel to whom no one writes.

Love in the Time of Cholera inhabits the Colonel's time but without his despair and ultimate rage. We can't really say that time is accepted here, or that the characters are resigned to it. We have only to think of Florentino's hairdo; of Fermina's wrinkled shoulders, fallen breasts; of these two comically ancient lovers generally, baffled by their renewed romance. Their age is part of what makes them touching, not quite ridiculous but always on the edge of being so—as they themselves quite clearly know. Time is real and regrettable—but not a disaster. Time is the birdshit on the romance, but the romance can accommodate it. It has only to be treated the way many contemporary writers treat clichés—to be treated as the cliché it is. It is possible to make a style out of its banality rather than our despair. If the modernists had been able to do this, their ghosts—Quentin Compson's Southerners, the dictator who doesn't know, even too late, what he is missing, many more—would have been not laid to rest but freed, released from their narrow haunts. Paradise would have been neither lost nor regained but deserted, left to its own devices. It is precisely through this metaphor that Alan Wilde figures the shift from modernism to
postmodernism, the second moment releasing, as he puts it, the humanity of the first: "paradise, once lost, is now abandoned." That is, the pathos of loss is abandoned, we make peace with the losses (and gains) of everyday living. In such a view the modernists, staying on, surviving their old anguishes, would have learned the lesson that their anxiety about time hid so thoroughly from them: that we domesticate time, come to terms with it, not by mythifying it but by counting it; not by tearing the hands off our watches, as Quentin Compson does in The Sound and the Fury, but by looking steadily at the hands as they go round. And round.

Chronology

1928
Gabriel José García Márquez born on March 6 in Aracataca, Colombia. It is also the year of the banana company massacre, an event Márquez would dwell on at length. His parents are not a presence in his early life. He is reared in the home of his maternal grandfather, Colonel Nicolás Ricardo Méjía. Gabriel García, García Márquez's father, was considered by the Colonel to be a philanderer, part of the rabble drawn to the banana industry, and of a political bent exactly the opposite of the Colonel. Gabriel García's persistence in the face of the Colonel's low opinion eventually resulted in his marriage to García Márquez's mother, Luisa Santiago Márquez Iguarán, and the story of their courtship is the inspiration for Love in the Time of Cholera. Living in his grandfather's house, García Márquez is surrounded by his aunts. As he tells the literary scholar Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, the aunts' storytelling and love of the fantastic are shaping forces in García Márquez's writing.

1936
Grandfather dies. García Márquez's grandmother is going blind, so the young man goes to live with his parents in Sucre. His father has found work as a pharmacist. The family has sufficient finances then to send young Gabriel to Barranquilla for primary school.
Chronology

1940
García Márquez awarded a scholarship to attend secondary school in Zipaquirá.

1946

1947–1949
Studies law at the National University in Bogotá and at the University of Catagena, both in Colombia. Begins journalism career as a reporter for El Spectador in Bogotá. Also during this time, reads Kafka’s The Metamorphosis, translated by Jorge Luis Borges, and is “liberated” at the idea that writing need not follow linear narrative and familiar plots.

1947
Meets Mercedes Barcha Pardo and declares her “the most interesting person” he has ever met. They swear fealty to one another, but will not be married for years.

1950
Leaves law school to pursue journalism full time. Works as a freelancer for several different newspapers and some magazines. Lives in a brothel, begins a number of literary friendships.

1953
Restless and not confident in his writing, García Márquez sells encyclopedias for a short time.

1955
Writers serial installments about a Colombian sailor who survives ten days at sea, the source for what he would later publish as Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor.

1955
Sent to Eastern Europe on assignment. Associates of García Márquez send his first book to a publisher. The novella, Leaf Storm, is released; it is set in Macondo.

1956
Military shuts down the main paper that employs García Márquez, El Spectador. He is trapped in Europe, where he stays for a year. During that time, he writes No One Writes to the Colonel. He also tours socialist countries in Europe, intrigued by the possibilities socialism offers for political troubles in Colombia. He sends articles back to newspapers and magazines in Colombia, and also writes 90 Days Behind the Iron Curtain.

1957
Military regime leaves power in Colombia and García Márquez returns home. He settles in Caracas and writes for Memento.

1958
Marries Mercedes Barcha in Barranquilla. He will dedicate the majority of his work to her. The couple’s first son, Rodrigo, is born.

1959–1961
García Márquez works in Cuba, covering the political turmoil in Havana, and briefly in New York. When he moves his family to Mexico City, after resigning his post at Prensa Latina, he is denied entrance back into the United States until 1971.

1961
Friends arrange for publication of No One Writes to the Colonel.

1962
Friends arrange for publication of Big Mama’s Funeral. Second son, Gonzalo, is born. In Evil Hour also published, but in a heavily edited form which García Márquez rejects. The corrected version will not be published for several years.

1965
Begins work on One Hundred Years of Solitude.

1967
One Hundred Years of Solitude is published to instant international acclaim, numerous awards, and three years of selling out print runs.

1967
Moves to Barcelona during the last years of the Franco dictatorship.

1972
Innocent Erendira published.

1974
Founds Alternativa, a leftist newspaper in Bogotá.

1975
Publishes Autumn of the Patriarch.

1975–present
Maintains residences in both Mexico City and Bogotá and is active in political causes while founding several civic and political organizations.

1977
Publishes Operación Carlota.

1981

1982
Wins the Nobel Prize for Literature. Publishes The Fragrance of Gunpowder, interviews with Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza.

1985
Publishes Love in the Time of Cholera. The book is widely praised, and some critics consider it superior to One Hundred Years of Solitude.

1989
Publishes The General in His Labyrinth.

1992
Publishes Strange Pilgrims, short stories.

1994
Publishes Love and Other Demons.

1996
Publishes News of a Kidnapping.

2000
García Márquez publicly declares himself “retired.”

2002
Publishes a memoir, Living to Tell the Tale.
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