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Faint Echoes and Faded Reflections: Love and Justice in the Time of Cholera

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Contemporary critical readings of the chronicles of the conquest of the Americas show them to have been as revisionary, as generically heterogeneous, as differing in styles, and as “fictive” as Gabriel García Márquez’s chronicle novels. The lengthily ruminative *Autumn of the Patriarch* is based on a historical incident: the night of Venezuelan General Marcos Pérez Jiménez’s precipitous fall from power. *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, as its title states, seems an overt chronicle and focuses on how “people below” cannot resist the weight of custom and history. Although *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is “the chronicle of a family in one town,” it also panoramically and “historically” represents a whole world.¹ After reading thousands of Simón Bolívar letters, in *The General in His Labyrinth* García Márquez chronicles Bolívar’s last days by way of the “metachronicle,” or Bolívar’s responses to information on events as he hears of them. And *Love in the Time of Cholera* can be read as an exemplar of high satire in chronicle form.

Although high satire draws on tropes of irony, such as an unspoken level of meaning that opposes the manifest level, unlike irony, high satire aims for social change.² *Love in the Time of Cholera* on the manifest level seems to support sentimental notions that it attacks on the latent level. The reader who accepts sentimental values promoted on the manifest level misses the novel’s savage satiric thrust. As sentimentality

blunts the perspicacity of the characters, of their understanding of the historical moment in which they fail to find themselves or read themselves, it reveals similar blundering and missing of the spirit of the letter on the part of a sentimental reader.

Sentimental notions distance a character such as Dr. Juvenal Urbino, who has dedicated himself to the eradication of cholera, from comprehending those historical events that cholera as an angry metaphor invokes. Cholera is a metaphor for a diseased society, for social irresponsibility, and for relationships that pass as "love" relationships. A case in point: during a trip through blue sky in a low-flying balloon, Dr. Juvenal Urbino looks down through a spyglass at a plantation of human bodies and remarks, "Well, it must be a very special form of cholera . . . because every single corpse has received the coup de grace through the back of the neck" (226-27). The balloon trip sequence offers in condensation the protagonists' relation to historical events. Although Urbino's comment, "it must be a very special form of cholera," can be read as an ironic trope (the latent meaning contradicts the manifest meaning), the doctor's inaction and the distance he as witness preserves, the actions he does not take, the absence of social change contain satiric ferocity. Not a second's reflection on Urbino's part reveals to this protagonist how he himself exemplifies a key problem of his historical moment. That the historic letter it is his mission to deliver is mislaid as soon as he delivers it and is never seen again (227) indicates the eclipse of moral or reflective presence and performance. He fails to comprehend the import of loss of mission in the unmaking of his nation.

Irrespective of how fabulous the content, the chronicle form invokes historical contextualization, and therein historical accountability. Stereotypically for the era and for his class, Dr. Juvenal Urbino becomes a satiric part of documentable history by being out of history, by over-flying historical events, as it were. It is as if, to paraphrase Doris Sommer's title, *Foundational Fictions*, this García Márquez "chronicle" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries shows how the epoch has lost even the fictions of foundation. The chronicle highlights historical "overlooking." Where Dr. Urbino's father is said to have fought and died from actual cholera in an aerostatic balloon, his son with his eyes to the spyglass, his son's displaced letter of mission, his son's wife, Fermina Daza, seeking memories of her past from the balloon, all indicate faint-heartedness, faint memories, and social obliviousness as the novel's underlying historical pattern.

Irony, in Anatole France's inimitable definition, is like a discussion

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between a Catholic and a Protestant in which both are converted. The play of levels of meaning in irony subverts certainty and inculcates a cast of mind that includes questioning the possibility of achieving social change. The satirist, however, by drawing blood, actively seeks social change.

Satire's whip as plied by Juvenal never failed to be recognized as a whip. In contrast, Swift was threatened with physical punishment for writing satire that went unrecognized as satire. Swift had aroused sentimental readers who objected to his modestly proposing that Irish babies be fricasséed for English consumption. Where reader sentimentality lies, there, it would seem, the reader is most blind to satire. Similarly, when *Love in the Time of Cholera* features sentiments out of contact with reality, it encounters readers inclined to believe that the enchanting García Márquez is not attacking their own cherished sentiments. It is unsurprising that *Love* continues to be read as being about love rather than a satirical attack on imitations of love and imitation heroism, imitations that fail to make contact with reality or to intervene in historical events.

Many readers read *Love* with the comfortable conviction that García Márquez is a "magical realist" and forget that he is an open partisan of the far left. This paper argues that he is writing about the vast majority of us entering the twenty-first century supposedly enlightened on psychological, social, and environmental issues, but actually substituting our own narcissistically sentimental selves. García Márquez suggests that we could and should situate and address historical "reality" ("reality" is a word that recurs frequently in his work). So it is that, by keeping ourselves the objects of our sentimental gaze, we remain out of time and out of touch, like the characters in *Love*, distanced from the historical events of which they are the components.

But, as indicated, although García Márquez plies satire's excoriating whip, he wraps it in the velvet of an absolute equanimity of tone. The nonjudgmental, urbane to florid narrator as chronicler, recorder of events that could have taken place in the post-Bolívar years between the 1820s and the immediate future,³ seems to preserve a safe distance between the reader and the text, as if the reader were outside that world, innocent of complicity with a narcissistic society, innocent in a history of planetary despoliation and social injustice that imperil nations and species.

This paper summons the suspicious reader to take a second look at the events recounted, at the benignity of the novel's protagonists, personages whose failure to address socioeconomic problems is

exacerbated by sentimental practices and behavioral models that defer ethical issues. The time of cholera symbolizes styles of avoidance of reality, a disease symbolic of our times, the contagion spread in part by the narcissism of readers, soft on critical self-reflection. For if the chronicle includes its readers in the pointedness of its historical thrust, the "innocent" narcissism of the characters reflects our own.

If this novel depicts through Florentino Ariza and Dr. Juvenal Urbino readers who read in a mode that Paul Ricoeur has made known as the hermeneutics of belief (32-36), then it could be an assault on velvet readers, insulated by their courtesans. This novel may be a critically unfashionable summons to those among us who are more cynical (but not necessarily less hopeful of change) to read in the mode that Ricoeur refers to as the hermeneutics of suspicion. If read so, the text of *Love* splits onto two levels, one representing the lovers as lovers, and the other doubting these characters can love. Many readers will believe in the happiness of *Love's* ostensible hero and heroine, Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza, when they finally consummate their relationship in their eighties (and our 1980s). Other readers may consider their happiness more than suspect.

The sentence, "It was inevitable: the scent of bitter almonds always reminded [Dr. Juvenal Urbino] of the fate of unrequited love," opens the novel-chronicle. The word "always" is one indication that this text should be looked at twice, for Dr. Juvenal Urbino has only the rest of the day to live. (The name "Juvenal," of course, points to satire, but so does "Urbino," whose "innocence" is nonetheless stressed.) In retrospect, the reader may see the "always" ominously suggests truncated duration; there is almost no time left.

Dr. Juvenal Urbino is checking on the suicide by cyanide on Pentecost Sunday of his great friend the photographer (about whom he knows next to nothing) Jeremiah de Saint-Amour (either Saint Love or *sans* love). Saint-Amour's deepest devotion is to chess. As it turns out, he is an outlaw, a cannibal, and a fugitive from Cayenne sent to that notorious prison for a violent and heartless crime. For years, Saint-Amour had maintained at his beck and call a mulatto mistress in the old slave or red-light district (example number one of love). When Urbino visits her, although "Everything looked wretched and desolate" (12) in "this death trap of the poor" (16), the poor are riotously celebrating Pentecost. The satirical doubleness of the text is furthered when the mulatto mistress professes that she prefers a back-alley life to any other.

The two contrastive perspectives in which Saint-Amour's beloved is

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introduced allow the reader to decide whether a back-alley life “lived with a devotion and submissive tenderness that bore too close a resemblance to love” (13) represents the absence of love, or whether “a clandestine life shared with a man who was never completely hers, and in which they often knew the sudden explosion of happiness” (14) represents a true love. The reader may also wonder if the relationship between Urbino and Saint-Amour represents true friendship; the only affinity between the suicide’s “soul’s friend,” Dr. Urbino, and Saint-Amour “was their addiction to chess.”

Dr. Urbino bears up under the shock of his friend’s suicide remarkably well, even though he misses Sunday mass for the third time in his life. But he is fortified by being able “to bear other people’s pains better than his own” (8). Where his own care is concerned, he doctors himself on a regular basis with drugs, cares so much for his personal appearance that he is a dandy, and, as a bookworm, shelters himself from domestic distress and other historical realities. He detests animals, but has come to terms with the presence in his ancestral house of a parrot, bought as a provocation by his wife, because he had proclaimed that “Nothing that does not speak will come into this house” (23). That fateful Pentecost, the parrot fatefully escapes.

[Dr. Juvenal Urbino] had forgotten that he ever owned a parrot from Paramaribo whom he loved as if he were a human being, when suddenly he heard him say: “Royal parrot.” His voice sounded close by, almost next to him, and then he saw him in the lowest branch of the mango tree.

“You scoundrel!” he shouted.

The parrot answered in an identical voice:

“You’re even more of a scoundrel, Doctor.” (41)

“Royal parrot”’s double referent (for the phrase could refer to that other bird, the doctor himself) sets up an oscillation of comparison between the education of the doctor and the education of the bird. The doctor has polished his education in Paris, and every afternoon instructs the bird by summoning “the most diligent reserves of his passion for pedagogy,”

until the parrot learned to speak French like an academician. Then, just for love of the labor, he taught him the Latin accompaniment to the Mass and selected passages from the Gospel according to St. Matthew. . . . (20)

As the quotation demonstrates, however, the parrot has progressed beyond mere imitation and ascended into inventive insult — “You’re

even more of a scoundrel, Doctor." But the doctor's education has made an absolute parrot of the doctor; he does not go beyond imitation.

Although most people look fondly on parrots,⁴ the mythologies of several Latin American peoples show that the *campesino* tends to regard the parrot as a parasite bird. The parrot eats a great deal, destroys crops, imitates voices not its own, and is relatively inedible.⁵ It is, of course, not easy to demonstrate that García Márquez intended this juxtaposition of sentimental and practical perspectives on the parrot. But he did intend the satirical reflection on Dr. Juvenal Urbino of birds that speak, for they twice signal his downfall. He has an affair with a black "bird," the black woman Barbara Lynch, who owns a troupial, a black "bird." Barbara Lynch brings about Urbino's fall from marital grace; his wife's parrot brings about his mortal fall on Pentecost Sunday.

Without rising above the ingestive, digestive, excremental, and imitational, Urbino woos his future wife Fermina properly but in a perfume of crows' shit, and drinks too much anisette with her father, then exploding in "star anise" vomit at home. Barbara Lynch suffers from "twisted colons" (243). The romantic Florentino suffers from constipation. As anyone who reads Swift knows, the satirist's vision is not only traditionally incongruous, but traditionally excremental. The array of lovers reaches excesses of anality (possessiveness) and orality (permissiveness), both extremes that confound perspective.

The theme of imitation (constipation) restricts actions to exercises in imitation. What passes for interaction occurs when an imitation interfaces with a mirror image or with a literary echo. For instance, the non-poet Florentino, who has enjoyed a sentimental education (63), is an echo chamber of allusions to the "real thing": Florentino is comprised of echoes of the Spanish Golden Age, of Spanish Romantic poetry, of Quixotic love. He echoes the heroes of Italian mock epics, of illustrated "dime" novels, of Dante's long devotion to the idealized woman child, Beatrice. Further allusions add to the jarring contrasts of satire: Florentino dresses like Vallejo (54); his sudden, unexpected sexual initiation by a woman who is to remain forever unknown by him echoes young Neruda seduced in the dark at a wheat harvest; the corpses in the river recall Chile after Allende's death. These allusions linking Florentino to historical personages and events are, however, free of substantive similarity. They slide from one to the next with the lightness of emptiness. Dante, Vallejo, Neruda represent love of the polis or political responsibility to their people, and artistic accomplishment. Florentino, however, who takes no prizes in poetry contests, and

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who does not even speak for himself, does not embody any excellence or altruism.

Florentino's styles of writing are as unstable and as variable as he is. When Florentino first attempts to deliver a letter of love to Fermina, bird shit falls on it.⁶ These letters establish a love object rather than build up interaction with an actual recipient of love. At one point, Florentino uses the body of a woman to mark the efficacy of his writing. With an arrow of blood, he writes "*This pussy is mine*" on the belly of Olimpia Zuleta (vulnerable Olimpia's name is as satirically incongruous as gullible Juvenal's). Florentino "forgets" to expunge this doubly false mark of possession; if her pussy is not her own, it may be said to be her husband's. Florentino's "arrow of blood" causes Olimpia's husband to assassinate her. When Florentino buries his demented mother "in the former Hand of God Ranch, which was still known as the Cholera Cemetery," he discovers Olimpia Zuleta's name "scrawled [in red paint] in the fresh cement of the crypt, and he thought in horror that this was one of her husband's sanguinary jokes" (217).

In this text, imitations or untruths are matched by figurative emptiness, motifs carried, for instance, by mirror images and by the "Immortal Photograph" of Fermina and her cousin. The "Immortal" image becomes faded and is misplaced. The young women, dressed up for a Belgian photographer, "giggled when they looked in the mirror and saw the resemblance to the daguerreotypes of their grandmothers" (133; they imitate life of another time). One copy of the photograph is found much later hidden "along with the fossil of a thought in a letter that had faded with time" (134). When Florentino observes Fermina's reflection in a restaurant in a mirror with an elaborate Venetian frame, he manages eventually to buy the mirror and hang it, so that he can possess "the place inside that for two hours had been occupied by her beloved reflection" (228).

But Florentino, although endlessly inscribing (shit is also a metaphor for copying styles past their prime), although endlessly inscribed (constipation is a metaphor for the blockage inherent in a sentimental and imitative education), is no more aware of the historical circumstances than anyone else is "in time." He is so "befuddled that he was unaware of the state of the world" (70). Fermina also is out of history. She dresses in outfits that date her only by "costume," by externals. When Florentino courts this counterfeit, she changes from her schoolgirl outfit into a "faded reflection," a Greek shift (59). The commemorative mirror in which her reflection no longer is, the dreams

through which she strides "like a queen from another time" (229), clearly show she inhabits no time and that she images an empty life.

Though she herself does not become aware of it, Fermina's absence has destructive social consequences. Hers is a double tale of long-lived love (she loves her husband) and irremediable immaturity (she loves him not; also vice versa). When Urbino dies, she begins to burn his wardrobe. "It is a sin to burn this," she would say, "when so many people do not even have enough to eat" (301). But she does not desist from sinning; she does not redress reality or emend social history; she has the things shifted from "their places of privilege to the stables that had been transformed into storage bins for remnants. . . ." (301).

Finally, in the latent text of this satire, suspicious readers who suspect the true lovers who ply "forever" up and down the river on the river boat named *The New Fidelity* are not surprised to find that García Márquez also refers to the ship as the floating fiesta. No more lasting than Dr. Juvenal's initial and terminal "always," these lovers' "forever" cannot be but short term, both in personal terms because of their advanced age, or in terms of the setting, for they float back and forth "forever," up and down, avoiding an environmentally depleted planet. On *The New Fidelity*, triumphantly, Fermina, who detests eggplant, cooks a dish Florentino christens "Eggplant al Amor."⁷ On the floating fiesta, Fermina discovers "that roses were more fragrant than before, that the birds sang at dawn much better than before, and that God had created a manatee and placed it on the bank at Tamalameque just so it could awaken her" (344). Playing the waltz, "The Crowned Goddess," on the violin, the very well-versed Florentino serenades his one true love, who gives him nightly enemas. "The words I am about to express: / They now have their own crowned goddess" is the novel's prefatory quotation by Leandro Díaz. Evidently nothing has transpired between beginning and ending. It was

as if they had leapt over the arduous calvary of conjugal life and gone straight to the heart of love. They were together in silence like an old married couple wary of life, beyond the pitfalls of passion, beyond the brutal mockery of hope and the phantoms of disillusion: beyond love. (345)

The satiric contradiction between manifest and latent meaning is naked: for these lovers, the heart of love is beyond love.

Readers who read with suspicion may suspect that the novel's conclusion excoriates narcissist, immature and self-indulgent, near-sighted happiness. The lovers float safe and free under the duplicitous yellow flag of cholera they are flying as they ply a river with banks

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depleted of animal and forest life. These lovers have been separated for their mature lifetime, she in her marriage to Dr. Juvenal Urbino, a marriage made for financial security and because her financially squeezed, embezzler father desired the marriage and so did her cousin, and because she had set a limit of age twenty-one to the unwedded state. For his part, Florentino has spent his time waiting for her by diverting himself with innumerable one-night stands and any number of affairs. One affair that lasts for two years is with his fourteen-year-old ward. He abandons this youngster when he discovers that the bells he hears that fateful Pentecost Sunday on which Saint-Amour commits suicide mean that Jr. Urbino, the husband of his "beloved," has died. His ward commits suicide when she discovers Fermina's letters and realizes that her elderly guardian, the child molester, has long been "in love with" and has left her for a more than traditionally older woman. He receives the news of her suicide while aboard *The New Fidelity*.

Readers who read with sentimental "crowned goddess" hopes in their hearts will not be suffocated by the sentimentality of the "Crowned Goddess" waltz Florentino plays for Fermina on *The New Fidelity*, or wonder at Florentino's brand-new, flashy shipboard outfit, or at the fortune he has acquired; nor will they ask if that yellow flag they sail under signals metaphoric cholera on board this ship of state, this "sentimental" chronicle of our loves, with its aged honeymoon ending.

What these characters lack is what Lacan calls the real and in which he situates the gods, that is, human value. What is missing from their lives is a real context or even those dreams through which history shapes networks that knit the individual to other people. Missing are love, justice, and the general welfare.

Many critics have paraphrased what Lacan means by the real, but significantly, Jameson correlates the real to history.⁸ In *Love*, the real, that is, some awareness, even unconscious, on the part of its characters of their roles in history, has been sacrificed to what Lacan calls the gaze. What escapes from the grasp of gazing is the truth. What escapes is history, the history that is a sense of oneself in a world that goes beyond oneself and in a world with genuine associations with others based on mutual recognition of valid symbols of value. Gazing, says Lacan, is "that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness" (74). Visionary seeing, or the seeing that transcends the imaginary and comprehends some portion of the symbolic, that is, that perceives authentic connections with others and that requires that a person mark the pre-existence of a given-to-be-seen. A person must

grant that something exists besides that person's own tastes, desires, and "education," something beyond inscription/imitation/constipation.

Instead of making some contact with pre-existence and thereby achieving some insight into the actualities of time, however, the narcissist commits a "profound *méconnaissance*" (Lacan 74). The narcissist sees only himself or herself seeing only himself or herself; this "represents mere sleight of hand" insofar as knowledge is concerned (Lacan 74). More, seeing only oneself blocks vision. For the creation of the imaginary is comprised of misreadings and misunderstandings that Jameson sums up as "optical illusions" (105).

Kristeva argues that the narcissist "protects emptiness, causes it to exist, and thus, as lining of that emptiness, insures an elementary separation" (24). To make something of that emptiness, to prevent its lasting interminably, one must recognize lack *as* lack. One must recognize substitutions as substitutions, as illusions. The parrot may bark more effectively than a watch dog, but a parrot is not a dog. The photograph is not of the grandmothers, but of two mortal cousins preening themselves out of their present. The mirror that Florentino purchases does not even have the honesty of a specular reflection, so out of touch even with Fermina's image at several removes is Florentino. These two lovers, like Florentino's mistress, Sara Noriega, exist on pacifiers, that is, on false organs, on false images, on false values.

The only even approximate contacts with the real in *Love* are offered by black or mulatto women who are, of course, misread, misunderstood and abused. Leona Cassiani is the "true woman in [yes, Florentino's] life although neither of them ever knew it":

He could not help thinking what he thought: black, young, pretty, but a whore beyond the shadow of a doubt. He rejected her from his life, because he could not conceive of anything more contemptible than paying for love: he had never done it.
(182)

As for Urbino, frozen in time and in prejudice—"In my opinion, the nineteenth century is passing for everyone except us" (105), the man could only make love to the mulatto woman who aroused his passion, Barbara Lynch, in the time it took to give an injection. Urbino also is lost in misreadings, a doctor who likes to repeat that he fell in love with his wife as the result of a clinical error (105); he thought Fermina as a young woman had contracted cholera. Symbolically, of course, the young woman had succumbed to cholera some time before then.

The publication of a journal named *Justice* is yet another example

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of narcissist falsification and misinterpretation/unintentional truth-telling in loveless *Love*, the name as sarcastic as the naming after popes, sons who are to bear illegitimate sons. For the editor's sole purpose in founding *Justice* is to attack families who belong to the Social Club, from which the editor has been excluded.

These editorial lies, the doctor's misdiagnosis, the "lovers'" affairs and falsifications nonetheless bear real consequences that are perhaps most poignantly emblemized by mother love that goes to inordinate lengths and that, in the case of Florentino's mother, leaves the mother mad. Tránsito, "In Transit," bears Florentino out of wedlock, devotes her whole life to decorating and redecorating their house "under the gaze of" his future bride (that *casa* of emptiness so significant in any number of Latin American novels). When the bride does not materialize, the mother, "regressing" into a children's story, "steals" the name "Little Roachie Martínez" (214). When even mother love ends so, clearly other forms of love, not to mention justice, must also be "imaginary," as "over-flown" as historical accountability is shown to be in this chronicle-novel. Social justice is as narcissistically privatized as the "new," the floating fidelity: self-deceptive and self-absorbed, unself-reflexively cruel, childish, and, in the end, insanely out of touch.

NOTES

¹ See Bell-Villada, 11.

² In my research I have as yet come across no reading of *Love in the Time of Cholera* as satire. The computer facilities at Hobart and William Smith Colleges library are invaluable insofar as cooperating libraries maintain up-to-date database bibliographic entries; the database includes *MLA* and four other index utilities; for García Márquez, a political science print-out appears as well. Even brief book reviews appear on the print-outs. For other bibliography, see *Gabriel García Márquez: An Annotated Bibliography*.

³ The two cholera epidemics in the text suggest approximate historical parallels: (1) six years before the crisis of the 1899 civil war (106), Dr. Marcus Aurelio Urbino dies of cholera; (2) an epidemic rages after his son, young Dr. Juvenal Urbino, returns from Paris (111). But the several intervening, even more vaguely dated epidemics show that cholera metaphorically represents a spreading social contagion, as when the Cholera Cemetery (217) becomes the Universal Cemetery (218).

⁴ One sentimental reader refused to believe ill of a parrot.

⁵ Several anthropological studies have made note of the parrot as a despised bird in Latin American mythologies; see for instance the myths from the Huarochirí area of Peru compiled by Francisco de Avila circa 1600.

⁶ I have my colleague, Edgar Paiewonsky-Conde, to thank for pointing this out.

⁷ Differences in tone and genre notwithstanding, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*

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could have been one of the inspirations for *Love in the Time of Cholera*: "Orlando had bought herself a complete outfit of such clothes as women then wore, and it was in the dress of a young Englishwoman of rank that she now sat on the deck of the *Enamoured Lady*" (IV). Like *Don Quixote* (probably the source of *Love's* jests on eggplant, since Sancho Panza "has heard"—and echoes—that Moors are great lovers of eggplant [Part II, Chapter III]), *Orlando* is another inspirational precursor reflected in many twentieth-century Latin American texts.

⁸ "It is not terribly difficult to say what is meant by the Real in Lacan. It is simply History itself. . . ." (Jameson 104).

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