Of Love and Other Fictions

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“This is the essence of magic, which doesn’t create but calls.”
—Franz Kafka

There is a wonderful saying about Ernest Hemingway that goes something like this: half of all American writers after Hemingway have tried to write like him, and the other half have tried not to. The urge to imitate, of course, is natural: writers who read a great novel are often tempted, consciously or unconsciously, to mimic the greatness of what they have read. But this quote about Hemingway speaks to more than that. It speaks to the wonderment and originality of the world Hemingway creates in his novels, and to a thing that is true of all great novels: in the best way, they haunt us, and live inside us. Once we read them, they are with us forever. Whether or not we try to imitate them, we can never escape them.

I have never felt the urge to imitate Ernest Hemingway, but for a long time I have tried to escape the urge to imitate Gabriel García Márquez, who passed away on April 17th of this year. It has been three years since I read García Márquez for the first time, and I remain captivated by the sweeping arcs of his novels, the colorful wildness of his individual sentences, and the enchantment that pervades his world. It was a curious feeling, in the beginning, to read Love in the Time of Cholera and remember that its author was alive. There was an extraordinary sense of wisdom and worldliness in that first line, which I can recall from memory even now: “It was inevitable: the scent of bitter almonds always reminded him of the fate of unrequited
love.” It seemed too perfect, too knowing, to have been written by someone who walked the same earth as I did.

The word “canonical” should not be tossed around lightly, but if there is one recent novelist who deserves inclusion in the list of the world’s greatest writers, it is García Márquez. Before he died, I would have cited as his living peers only Haruki Murakami, Philip Roth, Thomas Pynchon, and perhaps Cormac McCarthy, but García Márquez dwarfed them all. He can be reduced to no era or movement, has no clear predecessor, and, unlike many of our other greats, was beloved by all who read him. Now that he has ascended to heaven like his own Remedios, I feel it may be worthwhile to try to identify the things that made his work so wild and inventive, and thereby outline fully, in one place, the singular brilliance of his writing.

THE BOUNDARIES OF THE TRUE

Most readers and writers, in mentioning (and now, in eulogizing) García Márquez, immediately attach his name to the “magical realism” of which they deem him the father. But to treat García Márquez as merely the pioneer of this “magical realism” movement (which already existed when he started writing) is to greatly misconstrue him. This misrepresentation, of García Márquez as some Daliesque pioneer of the surreal, arises, I think, when one attempts to reduce García Márquez’s body of work to his masterpiece, One Hundred Years of Solitude. This understanding of García Márquez fails to apprehend his greater literary project and his complicated lifelong relationship with truth, of which the style of One Hundred Years is only one exponent.

Rather than seeing García Márquez as having hit a single, supreme vein with the peculiar magic of One Hundred Years, the best way to appreciate García Márquez’s genius is by understanding this “magical realism” as but one aspect of a larger concern that is visible throughout all of his work. In his short fiction, novels, journalism, and autobiography, García Márquez has always grappled, as many novelists have, with the boundaries between truth and fiction. In an interview with The Paris Review, he laid out these terms more or less explicitly: “The more I live and remember things from the past,”
he said, “the more I think that literature and journalism are closely related.” Later on, he says that “to find probabilities out of real facts is the work of the journalist and the novelist, and it is also the work of the prophet.”1 For Márquez, the elements of magical realism in One Hundred Years were just one way to evince these “probabilities” that, arguably, describe a truth that Márquez found impossible to relate otherwise. This is more or less what Salman Rushdie has said in his recent tribute to García Márquez: to wit, that in García Márquez, “imagination is used to enrich reality, not to escape from it.”2

I want to add to what Rushdie has said, however, by making the (I believe) important observation that García Márquez’s deviations from reality are not always of a piece with one another. In One Hundred Years the “magical” elements are essentially unacknowledged by the characters, which is, in part, what makes them so enchanting to us as readers. When the self-propelled trail of blood trickles through Úrsula’s kitchen, she does not question its presence but rather seems to know immediately what it portends. No one seems to think it strange, either, that it rains yellow flowers when José Arcadio Buendía dies. This is the specific mystique of One Hundred Years: that its world accepts events we deem impossible as natural and hardly remarkable. Hence, “magical realism.”

In his haunting short story “A Very Old Man With Enormous

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Wings,” however, García Márquez makes the bizarre element in the story—namely, the wings—an object of fascination and spectacle for the townspeople. The object that creates the most spectacle for the characters in One Hundred Years, by contrast, is something totally natural: the ice that José Arcadio discovers in the first chapter. In the haunting four-page fable “The Ghosts of August,” the entire plot revolves around the (possible) presence of a ghost in a mansion the protagonists are visiting. Everybody in the town, however, already believes in the ghost. The reader has to ask, then: what is magical or even abnormal about the fact that it (maybe) appears? Of Love and Other Demons also employs the impossible, but does so in a manner that is again not quite the same as that of One Hundred Years. When the warder comes into Sierva María’s cell and finds her “dead of love” with “strands of hair [gushing] like bubbles” on her head, he is perceiving not some exotic mutation of reality but a climactic representation of the bizarre (but sincerely meant) Thomas Aquinas quote that serves as the novella’s epigraph: “For the hair, it seems, is less concerned in the resurrection than other parts of the body.” Both this and the bizarre events in One Hundred Years are physically impossible, but that does not mean they are doing the same work for García Márquez. In fact, García Márquez does not even always make recourse in his fiction to this fantastic element: the romantic situation in his other masterpiece, Love in the Time of Cholera, is improbable, certainly, but not forbidden by the laws of physics. There are, at least, no enormous wings in the story of Florentino and Fermina.

If García Márquez really were a one-trick pony, a career distorer and surreal, I suspect he would not have been such an accomplished journalist. He genuinely believed that journalism, commonly regarded as the relation of objective facts, could express a truth more complicated and more significant than these facts. Nor, I propose, would he have written an autobiography—Living to Tell the Tale—so preoccupied with the quest to remember and represent things as they actually happened. I like comparing Living to the Tell the Tale with Vladimir Nabokov’s autobiography, Speak, Memory, in which Nabokov frequently bends, breaks, or utterly disregards the facts of his life. The efforts of Nabokov and García Márquez in their respective autobiographies seem to me substantially opposed: in the epigraph to Living García Márquez admits that, though he is going to
try his best to render his experiences accurately, “life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it.” The book that follows is one unbroken avalanche (the chapters are around seventy pages each) of García Márquez’s detailed memories. These memories are often curiously specific: he remembers calibers of pistols from his adolescence and inscriptions above the doors of homes from his childhood. The epigraph warns us that García Márquez may be erring in some places, but the exactitude of his recollections intimates to us that he is desperately trying to tell the truth. Nabokov, on the other hand, haughtily suggests in the preface to Speak that his book makes only the barest attempts to reach actual truth and may quite frequently lie to its readers.

García Márquez’s stated commitment to truth in his nonfiction is quite illuminating when compared with the miracles in much of his fiction. What he always seems to be after is the expression of something real; sometimes he chooses to express it through fantasy and myth, and sometimes through documentation and recollection. It is not easy, then, to figure out what is true in García Márquez’s work, and what is merely factual. All works of fiction are untrue: what makes Úrsula’s biblical lifespan any more fictional than the confined “realities” of a Tolstoy novel? The “magical realism” in One Hundred Years is just one way in which García Márquez addressed this problem, but his body of work seems to be more interested in the act of telling truth than in the fantastic shapes a told truth can take.

THE AGONY (AND ECSTASY) OF IMAGES

As I have said, this “magical realism” is what most people identify as what brought García Márquez’s fiction onto the world’s stage. But the particular beauty of Márquez’s work is more grounded within the human than in the fantastical. Márquez is at his most beautiful when he brings us into the peculiar and often perverse space of his emotional world: there we encounter the qualities that make his fiction immediately recognizable—its lushness, its lovesickness, and its morbidity. The real innovation of García Márquez’s work is, I think, not his deviation from realistic modes but his capacity for representing the various states and sorrows of earthly life. Even if García Márquez had never dipped his toe into the waters of magical
realism, he would still be an unparalleled writer.

His emotional palette is vibrant and unpredictable, his relationship with death sagely and trenchant. The moods and images in his prose mix and smear against one another until one has a hard time telling if what one is reading is supposed to be hilarious, depressing, or both. Take, for example, one of the most memorable scenes in *Love in the Time of Cholera*: during her marriage to Juvenal Urbino, the heroine Fermina Daza exhibits a startlingly powerful sense of smell. When her child gets lost in the midst of a crowded marketplace, she finds him in a matter of minutes by following “the smell of caca.” Half a page later, she smells the scent of another woman on her husband’s clothes and discovers that he has been unfaithful to her, which turns her bitterly against him for the rest of the chapter. No one else, except maybe Proust, can so deftly and so beautifully capture such ambivalent relationships.

The novels and stories of García Márquez abound with such moments; these moments saturate each text to the point of overflow, and when they can find no room to breathe on the page they make their home in the reader’s mind. The most powerful of these moments, invariably, are about the two things in which García Márquez shows the most wisdom: death and love. It is for his attention to these human realities on each page, or even within a single sentence, that García Márquez deserves the everlasting reverence he is sure to receive.

*One Hundred Years*, in particular, is obsessed with death. García Márquez seems to have found, over the course of five hundred pages, at least five hundred ways in which a person can die. José Arcadio Buendía,
who lives long past the age of one hundred, spends a huge swath of the novel tied to a tree, slowly dehydrating and going delirious. Colonel Aureliano Buendía’s seventeen sons, all of whom are also named Aureliano, are assassinated on the same night. The novel begins with the image of Aureliano facing a firing squad, but the only character actually killed by a firing squad is Arcadio, the Buendía patriarch’s idiotic grandson. In one of the novel’s most bitterly funny moments, Arcadio goes out screaming, “Bastards! Long live the Liberal Party!” Seventy-five pages later, the Liberal Party is long gone.

*Love in the Time of Cholera*, predictably, is the best place to find García Márquez grappling with love, which for him is, in many ways, intricately related to death. Over the course of his fifty-year pursuit of his beloved Fermina Daza, the novel’s Florentino Ariza finds himself in a myriad of romantic situations. The rainbow of women Florentino meets during the novel spans García Márquez’s romantic genius at its most irresistible: we can encounter, sometimes in the same chapter, both the wild ecstasy of romantic anticipation and the tragic clumsiness of lust. Listen, for example, to the way he describes Florentino’s infatuation with one of his beloveds, Rosalba: “[He] clung to the illusion that sooner or later she would betray herself, if only with a gesture. He even observed the changes in her breathing, watching the reliquary that hung on her batiste blouse as he looked at her without dissimulation over the book he pretended to read, and he committed the calculated impertinence of changing his seat in the dining room so that he would face her.” Now, listen to one of the novel’s most grotesquely tragic moments, in which Florentino accidentally dooms one of his flames, Olimpia: “In a sudden inspiration, Florentino Ariza opened a can of red paint that was within reach of the bunk, wet his index finger, and painted the pubis of the beautiful pigeon fancier with an arrow of blood pointing south, and on her belly the words: This pussy is mine.” That night, when Olimpia returns home to her husband with the words still on her stomach, he slits her throat.

What more could I add to such a moment by discussing its dark, heartbreaking ironies? The person who wrote those sentences possessed a mind familiar with all the crannies and mutations of the human heart and mind: García Márquez knew in equal measure
the holy (see the convent in *Of Love and Other Demons*) and the profane (see the whorehouse in *Love in the Time of Cholera*). His wisdom, more so than his fantasy, is the reason we should revere him. There are few, if any, other authors who could, over the space of two pages, give us Florentino Ariza’s “six months of furious lovemaking with the Widow Nazaret” and Fermina Daza “sprawling on the bathroom floor, her hair loose, smoking her first mule drivers’ cigarette.” There is an intimacy with color and shape in García Márquez’s prose that makes his debauched tyrants and heartbreaking tragedies especially indelible: when Aureliano Buendía “[puts] the blanket over his head like a cowl, [brushes] his dripping mustache with his fingers, and [goes] to urinate in the courtyard,” and sees his father “still dozing under the shelter of palm fronds that had been rotted by the rain,” we are in García Márquez’s world and no one else’s: darkly funny, bitterly unfulfilled, almost nauseatingly colorful, and ultimately filled with deep, jaded wisdom. It takes tremendous compassion and understanding to render life so, and García Márquez had them.

**A SENSE OF PLACE (OR PLACELESSNESS)**

The most powerful image I have encountered in any of García Márquez’s work, and I think one of the most important indicators of his greatness, is an expository passage at the beginning of *Love in the Time of Cholera* describing the novel’s unnamed Caribbean port town in vivid detail. As an example of verbal style it is formidable, but it also speaks to a talent of García Márquez that is perhaps what makes his work universal: in it, his descriptions of place lend themselves to startling particularity but also to dreamlike mobility.

“The streets,” he writes, “were full of paper garlands, music, flowers, and girls with colored parasols and muslin ruffles who watched the celebration from their balconies.” Later, he tells us that in the ghettos of the town “everything looked wretched and desolate, but out of the sordid taverns came the thunder of riotous music, the godless drunken celebration of Pentecost by the poor.” In the harbor, under the “furious La Manga sun,” Juvenal Urbino likes “to see the wooden paddles of the riverboats with their shining lights, purifying the stagnant garbage heap of the bay with the wake of their music.”
In the aforementioned interview with The Paris Review, García Márquez joked that the problem with writing about the Caribbean “is that Caribbean reality resembles the wildest imagination,” but the description he gives of the port town is about as convincing as prose can get. It is obviously beautiful, but it is beautiful in a way that is both locatable and untraceable. The geometries of death, love, and emotion that we find in One Hundred Years, as time gilds the book with the admiration of future generations, will become more than striking or unforgettable: they will become myths. In aping magical tropes of folk tales, Biblical stories, and Ovidian parables, García Márquez infused his writing with a quality of grandeur from which writers in future ages will draw to lend their own stories a quality of age and time-tested wisdom. His works of fiction present us with more than just spellbinding heroes, grotesque lusts, and rich images: they are also documents that teach us, in their own strange way, how to live as human beings, and how to write as them.

I like to challenge readers of Shakespeare to find one page that has nothing poetic, funny, or thought provoking in it, and I would make no hesitations in issuing that challenge about García Márquez’s books and short stories as well. The platitude about Shakespeare is that he fenced in all of human nature in thirty-seven plays—perhaps everything one needs to know about how to live (and how not to) can also be found within the work of Gabriel García Márquez. That hilariously effusive William Kennedy quote printed on the back of most editions of One Hundred Years of Solitude, namely that it is “the first piece of literature since the Book of Genesis that should be required reading for the entire human race,” might not be such a great exaggeration. His novels, especially One Hundred Years, are panoplies, pastiches, picaresques; he can fit more wisdom—more patriarchs tied to chestnut trees, more warriors who survive lethal doses of poison, more tyrannical banana corporations—onto one page than a lesser writer could fit into an entire novel.
This is a wisdom gained through intimate encounters with the worst and best that life has to offer; it is akin to the wisdom of the Latin proverb *solvitur ambulando*: it is solved by walking, by experience and movement. We “learn” less from García Márquez’s fiction than we do from a cookbook, as Thomas De Quincey said of *Paradise Lost*. Such wisdom is neither dogmatic nor instructive, but a powerful, poetic, and unforgettable sense of what it is to be human. García Márquez’s characters, rough and flawed like the characters in folk tales and stories passed down through oral traditions, are not quite examples for us, and yet in the “frantic hammers” of José Arcadio Segundo, carving an impossible channel from Macondo to the sea, or in Meme’s drinking of “a chicken broth that landed in her stomach like an elixir of resurrection,” we see a reflection of our world whose sadness and foolishness are the same as our own.

Halfway through *One Hundred Years*, it starts raining and does not stop. The rain affects everything, even the machines that have come to Macondo, causing them to “have flowers popping out among their gears if they were not oiled every three years.” Half a page after this sentence, García Márquez tells us of the matriarch Úrsula, who has suffered much and is close to death, waking up with her back “paved with leeches.” Santa Sofía de la Piedad, a quiet and servile woman, picks them off of Úrsula silently and “crush[es] them with a firebrand.” Where else can we find such piercing insight, with such diversity and range of subject and spirit, as we find even in this one passage? Through the fantastic and impossible, but also—and especially—through the repulsive and mundane, García Márquez always manages to enchant us. My favorite quote of his, immortalized in Gerald Martin’s biography, was his remark that “everyone has three lives: a public life, a private life, and a secret life.” In all of his works, he touched deeply, with wit and passion, on one or all of these three lives. If that is not magic—not magical realism, but magic—then I do not know what is.

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