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The Dangers of Gullible Reading: Narrative as Seduction in García Márquez' *Love in the Time of Cholera*

Author: M. Keith Booker

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[essay date summer 1993] *In the following essay, Booker asserts that Love in the Time of Cholera is a more complex book than most critical readings suggest and links the novel with Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary and Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita.]*

Initial critical reaction to Gabriel García Márquez' *Love in the Time of Cholera* has been positive, even rhapsodic, and most readers have found the book to be an uplifting affirmation of the human spirit, the author's kindest and gentlest work. Gene Bell-Villada is typical: even while recognizing that overly romantic attitudes are sometimes the subject of satire in the book, he still concludes that *Love* is basically "a good old-fashioned love story" (191). Indeed, Bell-Villada goes on to applaud García Márquez for his "courage and originality in writing a novel of love (a subject traditionally thought of as the preserve of younger authors) when on the verge of old age" (202). But *Love* is a complex work, and as García Márquez himself has said of it in an interview, "you have to be careful not to fall into my trap" (Williams 136). *Love in the Time of Cholera* is indeed a novel of love, but it is also much more, and Mabel Moraña probably gets closer to the heart of the matter when she suggests that it is "like other texts in the narrative saga of García Márquez, a reflection on power" (40).

The theme of love in the novel focuses on the lifelong fascination of Florentino Ariza with Fermina Daza, a fascination that is strongly informed by Ariza's own excessively romantic attitude toward life. This attitude derives largely from Ariza's gullible reading of bad literature, and the echo here of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is surely more than accidental. But there are more links between the texts of Flaubert and of García Márquez than this obvious one. In particular, the association with Flaubert provides a useful entry point into *Love* as a meditation on power as well as an exploration of romanticism. Near the end of *Madame Bovary* the sinister and self-promoting pharmacist Homais compiles a list of the credentials that he believes qualify him for the cross of the Legion of Honor, which he will in fact eventually win. Among these accomplishments, he congratulates himself for the "devotion" he showed doing his professional duty "in the time of the cholera" (253).¹ Perhaps one should not make too much of the fact that García Márquez verbally echoes this passage from Flaubert in the title of his novel, especially as the title functions on a number of levels within García Márquez' own text.² The echo may even be coincidental. But in the richly intertextual work of García Márquez such correspondences often bear surprising fruit when harvested carefully, even when the seeds have not originally been planted by the author. For example, García Márquez himself has identified "allusions" in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to works he had not even read at the time he wrote his book (Janes 7). In any case, it is clear that *Madame Bovary* is of major importance as a source for *Love*, and the illumination provided by reading García Márquez through Flaubert is considerably enriched by bringing Homais into the picture, since Flaubert's manipulative pharmacist-vulgarian calls attention to the quests for power and domination that constitute a central theme of García Márquez' novel as well.

Most obviously, Homais is a representative of the philistine impulses that Flaubert so abhorred in the society of his contemporary France. But more than that, he is a generalized figure of the bad aspects of Enlightenment thinking. He prides himself on his education, his knowledge, and his scientific approach to things, and--following the Baconian dictum that "knowledge is power"--he puts his talents to use in furthering his own ambitions and in manipulating those around him for his own ends. As such he recalls the critique of Enlightenment thinking put forth by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that the scientific impetus of the Enlightenment is informed by a quest not for a liberating truth, but for a power that ultimately enslaves: "What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order to wholly dominate it and other men" (*Dialectic* 4). In particular, they suggest that the emphasis on the power of the individual in Enlightenment thought is related to a drive to dominate nature, a drive that inevitably turns back upon itself and leads to the formation of individuals who are internally repressed and of societies consisting of individual subjects who strive for domination of each other.

The Horkheimer/Adorno critique of the Enlightenment is also clearly relevant to the concerns of García Márquez' fiction. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* José Arcadio Buendía insists on putting the scientific knowledge of the gypsy Melquíades to work for

practical technological use, but his attempts to dominate nature through science invariably fail--and often in ways that recall Horkheimer and Adorno quite directly. For example, when José Arcadio attempts to use the gypsy's magnets to locate gold he finds instead an ancient suit of Spanish armor, with its associated echoes of imperial domination. In general, the citizens of Macondo find technological progress to be not liberating, but enslaving.³ Science and technology also figure as negative forces in **Love**, particularly in the way that technological "progress" has led to the degradation of Colombia's natural environment and to the destruction of the Great Magdalena River that figures so centrally in the book. But García Márquez is no Luddite, and his argument is not with technological progress per se.⁴ Instead, the link to Horkheimer and Adorno (courtesy of Flaubert's Homais) indicates that the real target of García Márquez' criticisms of the negative side of progress is the kind of ideology of domination that informs not only Enlightenment science, but a whole variety of other mechanisms of power as well, including imperialism, totalitarianism, and the Latin American tradition of *machismo*. A look at **Love** through the optic of these issues shows a book far more complex than the sweetly sentimental love story it is often perceived to be.

The character in **Love** whom Homais resembles most is Dr. Juvenal Urbino. Urbino is, on the surface at least, a rather admirable figure, if a little stiff and conventional. He is intelligent, educated, successful, an image of the kind of enlightened man who might bring hope of a better life to the benighted inhabitants of García Márquez' fictionalized Colombia. But a comparison with Homais helps to reveal certain ominous cracks and fissures in the surface of this depiction of Urbino. For example, one begins to wonder whether Urbino's rise to social and professional prominence might partake of some of the ruthlessly self-serving ambition that drives Homais onward toward the cross of the Legion of Honor. Indeed, Urbino himself is not above accepting honors, including being granted the rank of Commander in that same Legion (43). Finally, especially if Homais is read through Horkheimer and Adorno, aspects of Urbino's character such as the fact that he is so thoroughly "in control of his nature" begin to take on undertones of a drive for domination that may inform all of the good doctor's activities (105).

When we first meet Urbino at the beginning of the book we learn that he is a man very much accustomed to being in charge of whatever situation he may encounter. He arrives on the scene of the suicide of his friend Jeremiah de Saint-Amour, bullies the police inspector, and orders that the press be told that the death occurred due to natural causes (5-6). These actions, of course, can be interpreted as a perfectly understandable attempt to protect the memory of his friend, though it is telling that Urbino refuses to intercede with the Archbishop so that Saint-Amour can be buried on holy ground. And Urbino shows another negative side to his character when he reads Saint-Amour's suicide note and learns that his friend had been not a political exile as he had thought, but an escaped convict. Further, he discovers that Saint-Amour had been carrying on a clandestine sexual relationship for years. These revelations offend Urbino's self-righteous sense of propriety, and he shows not understanding, but disgust, rejecting his friend's memory. And when Urbino's wife Fermina Daza expresses sympathy for the dead Saint-Amour, Urbino violently explains to her the reason for his revulsion: "What infuriates me is not what he was or what he did, but the deception he practiced on all of us for so many years" (32). In short, what angers Urbino is the knowledge that he has been duped, that he has not been so thoroughly in charge of matters as he has believed--and of course there is the irony of the fact that Urbino himself has a past clandestine sexual history of which he may not want to be reminded.

Being in charge is clearly important to Urbino. Though he conducts numerous civic projects that are to the benefit of the local community it is not at all clear that he does so out of purely selfless motives. He does not hesitate, for example, to utilize the fire department that he has organized on European models for personal needs such as catching his escaped parrot. Urbino shows his typical imperious style when he sends for the firemen: "Tell them it's for me," he says (25). Indeed, in looking at Urbino's organization of the fire department one might keep in mind that Flaubert's Homais tops off the list of his own projects with which he lays claim to the cross of the Legion of Honor by noting that "there is always the assistance I give at fires!" (253).

It is also worth noting that not just the fire department, but all of Urbino's innovations tend to be based on European models. In **Love**, as in **One Hundred Years of Solitude**, scientific knowledge is something that comes to Colombia from the outside, as a sign of European technical and cultural superiority. But García Márquez consistently suggests in his work that such European imports often result not in improvement, but in degradation of living conditions in Colombia. The local aristocracy in **Love** are mocked for their fascination with European consumer goods (an image of foreign economic domination), even though those goods may be useless and out of place in Latin America. On her various trips to Europe even the practical Fermina Daza buys massive amounts of commodities in an attempt (again echoing Emma Bovary) to fill the emptiness in her life. Most of these goods (like heavy European coats) simply get stored in trunks and closets when she returns to Colombia. And García Márquez indicates the dehumanizing impact of this invasion of commodities in Fermina's own attitude: "she was dismayed by the voracity with which objects kept invading living spaces, displacing the humans, forcing them back into corners" (301).

In this vein it is important to note that, though Urbino reads extensively, he has no interest in the literature of his native Latin America. Instead, he reads the latest books ordered from Paris and Madrid, "although he did not follow Spanish literature as closely as French" (8). This sense of disengagement from his local context perhaps shows up most clearly in Urbino's style of dealing with the local cholera epidemics that he must combat in the course of his professional duties. Urbino's father Dr. Marco Aurelio Urbino had become so passionately and personally involved in the treatment of cholera victims that he himself contracted the disease and died from it (112-13). After this death, Juvenal Urbino becomes obsessed with battling against cholera, the very existence of which seems to stand as an affront to his personal mastery and as a challenge to his ability to dominate nature through science. Urbino shows a strong disdain for his father's methods, "more charitable than scientific," and himself takes a detached scientific approach to the battle, putting his efforts into the institution of new scientific public health projects such as the ones he has observed in France rather than into hands-on treatment of disease victims. These projects include the construction of the first local aqueduct, the first sewer system, and a covered public market, and they are no doubt of benefit to Urbino's fellow citizens. However, many of these projects also smack of the kind of self-promoting activities that might be undertaken by Flaubert's Homais, such as when the pharmacist encourages the disastrous surgery on poor Hippolyte not so much for the benefit of the club-foot as to prove the extent of his own enlightened knowledge.

Urbino's reliance on European models clearly participates in García Márquez' ongoing critique of the way in which Latin America has contributed to its own exploitation through its acceptance of the myth of foreign superiority. This link between Urbino and the imperialist domination of Latin America further clarifies the drive for power and dominance that is so central to Urbino's personality. At the death scene of Saint-Amour, Urbino speaks to the police inspector "as he would have to a subordinate," and indeed Urbino tends to treat everyone like subordinates, including his wife Fermina Daza. It is in his relationship with Fermina, in fact, that Urbino's style of relating to others through domination shows itself most clearly.

When he first begins his courtship of Fermina, Urbino does so very much in the manner of a military siege, and his early letters, though composed in an apparently "submissive spirit," already show an "impatience" that the independent-minded Fermina finds unsettling (124). And to press the courtship Urbino mobilizes whatever forces are at his command. Fermina's father Lorenzo, hungry for the social legitimation that would come to his daughter through a marriage to Urbino, eagerly encourages the courtship. Even more tellingly, Fermina has been expelled from her convent school for reading love letters from Florentino Ariza during class hours, and Urbino manages to induce the school to offer to reinstate Fermina if she will only entertain his advances.

Urbino's domineering style of courtship continues into the marriage, and despite certain indications early in the book that the Urbino-Daza marriage is nearly ideal, it becomes clear as the narrative progresses that the relationship is seriously flawed. Urbino's own rage for order and control can be seen in his unromantic proclamation that "the most important thing in a good marriage is not happiness, but stability" (300). Indeed, this practical attitude seems to form the very foundation of the marriage. Urbino marries Fermina though she is well below his social class, and he apparently does so because he believes that she will be a good and useful wife to him. As McNerney puts it, "She is a useful adornment, as befits the wife of a man like Urbino" (82).

But one suspects that Urbino marries below his social class at least partially because such a marriage gives him the leverage that he needs to feed his desire for dominance in the relationship. In any case, Fermina herself often feels trapped and constrained within a life that is clearly Urbino's more than hers. Late in the marriage she realizes that she is little more than a "deluxe servant" under Urbino's command:

She always felt as if her life had been lent to her by her husband: she was absolute monarch of a vast empire of happiness, which had been built by him and for him alone. She knew that he loved her above all else, more than anyone else in the world, but only for his own sake: she was in his holy service.(221)

Indeed, Urbino is so overbearing that when he is forced to take a laxative he demands that his wife take one as well, so that she must share in his alimentary inconvenience (222).

That the private reality of the Urbino-Daza marriage is so different from the public perception of it is one of the strategies used by García Márquez in the book to indicate the seductiveness (and potential duplicity) of narrative. That the marriage is perfect makes a good story, and so the gullible townspeople generally accept that interpretation without question. But the construction of *Love*, in which the original presentation of the Urbino-Daza marriage is gradually undermined by the accumulation of additional details, makes the point that appearances can be deceiving and that one should not leap to interpretive conclusions hastily. This point is made most clearly by an interesting inconsistency in the narration of the book. Early on, when the marriage is still being presented as ideal, we are treated to a somewhat amusing anecdote from that marriage, in which Urbino's complaint that Fermina has failed to keep the bathroom stocked with soap mounts into a tempest-in-a-teapot crisis that is of course successfully resolved. And, we are told, this minor incident was the most critical problem that had ever arisen in the relationship: "When they recalled this episode, now they had rounded the corner of old age, neither could believe the astonishing truth that this had been the most serious argument in fifty years of living together" (29).

The very triviality of this argument reinforces the notion that the marriage is one without important difficulties. But there may be a good reason why "neither could believe" that this episode was their most serious marital problem. Late in the book we are suddenly told of Urbino's serious mid-life affair with the mulatta Barbara Lynch, an affair of which Fermina learns and to which she reacts by moving out and going to live with her Cousin Hildebranda on her provincial ranch. Urbino finally convinces Fermina to return to him after a lengthy separation, but the incident has clearly posed a serious threat to the marriage. The jarring disjunction between the earlier account of the soap incident and this later story of Urbino's affair with Barbara Lynch brings the reader to a sudden realization that the narrator of *Love* may not be entirely reliable and that we should be cautious about accepting anything we are told in the book at face value.

This emphasis on unreliable narration is reinforced at several points in the book, as when the newspaper *Justice* publishes (after Urbino's death) what is apparently an entirely fictitious account of an alleged love affair between Urbino and Fermina's friend Lucrecia del Real del Obispo. It may indeed be justice that this account is published, since the affair with Miss Lynch went undetected, but the fact that the quickly suppressed story finds believers (including Fermina herself) is a further warning against gullibility in reading. Of course, the most gullible reader of all in *Love* (and the most obvious link to Flaubert) is the hopeless *bovaryste* Florentino Ariza. Ariza's gullibility is established early in the book in his attempts to recover the treasure from a Spanish galleon that is rumored to have been sunk in the Caribbean just off the Colombian coast. Despite warnings that the attempt is folly, Ariza employs Euclides, a twelve-year-old boy, to dive for the treasure. Amazingly, the boy apparently finds the ship and begins to return with bits of jewelry supposedly recovered from the wreck. Ariza is about to mount a major salvage campaign when his mother (an experienced pawn broker) determines that the jewelry is fake and that Ariza has been duped by the boy.

Fermina treats the galleon episode as another example of Ariza's "poetic excesses," and it is true that Ariza is exceedingly susceptible to romantic fantasies in general. As with Emma Bovary, this susceptibility shows up most clearly in Ariza's reading of literature. The young Ariza devours the various volumes of the "Popular Library," a massive compilation of works that observes no distinctions of national origin or literary quality, including "everything from Homer to the least meritorious of the local poets" (75). At

first glance, there is considerable potential in this compilation. From the point of view of Mikhail Bakhtin, one might find a source of carnivalesque energy in this conflation of "high" and "low" culture, a conflation that might potentially undermine the pretensions to seriousness and superiority of the European classics. Indeed, this combination of voices from official and from popular culture is reminiscent of the polyphonic intertextual voicing in García Márquez' own texts. But the point of the Bakhtinian carnival (or of the rich mixture of cultural voices in García Márquez) is to celebrate difference and diversity and to bring them out in the open. The totally indiscriminate compilation of the Popular Library, on the other hand, acts more to efface difference entirely, especially as it is read by Ariza, who "could not judge what was good and what was bad," knowing only that he prefers verse to prose, especially verse with predictable patterns of rhythm and rhyme that make it easy to memorize (75). The works in this library are mere commodities, all reduced to the same level of inter-changeability.

Not only is Ariza an indiscriminating reader, but he is unduly influenced by what he reads, attempting to live his life in a way that is patterned after the poetry he reads. Thus, the poems he reads in the Popular Library become "the original source for his first letters to Fermina Daza, those half-baked endearments taken whole from the Spanish romantics" (75). Indeed, Ariza, though a poet of sorts, is so absorbed in the poetry of others that he is capable of writing only in the most imitative of fashions. When he employs his poetic skills to write love letters for others he writes not only in a style that mimics the poets he has read, but even in a handwriting that reproduces that of the supposed writers of the letter. And he is so successful in his imitations that lovers seek out his services to the point that he sometimes finds himself writing both sides of the communication and therefore producing entire simulated courtships.

Like Flaubert's Emma Bovary (and León Dupuis) Ariza identifies wholly with the books he reads, replacing the characters with real people he knows, "reserving for himself and Fermina Daza the roles of star-crossed lovers" (142). But despite this conflation of art and reality, Ariza uses poetry not to engage the world, but to escape from it. When he attempts to employ his skills as an imitator of styles to the writing of business letters, he fails completely. Throughout his career he suffers professionally because he is unable to write even the simplest business letter without ascending into an inappropriate lyricism. Even in matters of love Ariza's poetic bent can act as a wall between himself and reality, as when he immerses himself in love poetry in the midst of a "transient hotel" while remaining virtually oblivious to the activities of the prostitutes who surround him (75-76).

Fermina Daza provides a focal point at which Dr. Juvenal Urbino and Florentino Ariza converge, and there is an obvious element of dialogue between the science of Urbino and the poetry of Ariza that results from this convergence. But, as with the similar dialogue that occurs in *Madame Bovary* between Homais and Emma Bovary, this clash of discourses is highly complex. García Márquez, who depicts even the dictator in *Autumn of the Patriarch* with a sympathy that is often quite touching, shows his typical equanimity by presenting neither Urbino nor Ariza as entirely negative figures. Urbino's science does a great deal to improve the lot of the local populace, and Ariza's excessively romantic visions are in the end rewarded as he finally consummates his lifelong fascination with Fermina Daza. Still, Urbino's focus on science leads to a tunnel vision that cuts him off from genuinely human interactions and leads to his treatment of other people as objects for his own domination. And Ariza's absorption in poetry leads to a similar dehumanizing blindness, since he often treats others not as real people but as literary characters. For example, he seduces América Vicuña, a fourteen-year-old girl who has been entrusted to his guardianship, then summarily drops her when Urbino dies, making Fermina accessible to Ariza once again. The suggestively named América Vicuña then commits suicide, a victim of her own sheep-like gullibility and a symbol of the rape of Latin America by foreign powers.

Ariza's relationship with this girl is not that unusual in the fictional world of García Márquez, as the autumnal patriarch's fascination with young school girls amply illustrates. But Ariza's *bovarysme* invites comparison with literary models, and this particular autumn-spring relationship inevitably recalls that between Nabokov's Humbert Humbert and Lolita. Humbert, like Ariza, bears many similarities to Emma Bovary, and like Ariza his projection of his own aestheticized fantasies into the real world allows him to absorb other people within those fantasies, leaving them thoroughly objectified and "safely solipsized" (*Lolita* 62). Indeed, one suspects that Ariza has operated in this mode with all of the 622 "long-term liaisons" he has conducted during his "patient" wait for Fermina. Despite repeated suggestions in the text that Ariza has an unequalled capacity for love and that each of these 622 relationships is special and unique, enough is enough, and it seems clear on reflection that Ariza's initiation of new relationships at a clip of one per month for over fifty years bespeaks a lack of real emotional engagement in any of them. García Márquez' narrator describes a number of Ariza's affairs, apparently in an attempt to convince us of the sincerity and authenticity of Ariza's affections for his numerous conquests. And this attempt almost succeeds, despite the clear evidence that the affairs are simply too numerous for this sincerity to be possible. Narrative is a very seductive form, García Márquez seems to be telling us, and even the wisest of us must be on guard against gullibility in reading.⁵

The link to Nabokov helps to clarify this ongoing attack on gullibility. Humbert Humbert is a pervert, a rapist, and a murderer, and we are reminded repeatedly in *Lolita* of his mental and physical cruelty. Yet he is also a master of language who constructs a narrative so charming and so brilliant that many readers are seduced into sympathy with his position and are able to accept his claims that his relationship with Lolita was purely aesthetic. Similarly, Ariza's numerous love stories (especially the central one involving Fermina) make such attractive narratives that we are tempted to read him as the ideal lover he apparently thinks himself to be, not as a manipulative womanizer who jumps from one bed to another, causing considerable suffering and multiple violent deaths among the objects of this insatiable sexual appetite. Indeed, like Nabokov, García Márquez sprinkles his text with reminders of the sinister side of Ariza's sexual exploits--and exploitation. Perhaps the most telling of these concerns Olimpia Zuleta, a married woman whom he seduces after an extended siege. Afterwards, he marks his conquest by painting the woman's belly with the words "This pussy is mine" (217). That same night, her husband discovers the inscription and cuts her throat, whereupon Ariza's principal reaction is not remorse, but simply fear that the husband might discover his identity and come after him as well.

It is true, as most critics have realized, that the confrontation between Urbino and Ariza represents not just a competition between rivals in love, but also a clash of competing worldviews. Moraña seems to have understood this clash most fully:

Vitalism and rationalism, modernization and tradition, Europeanization and popular culture, integration and marginality

thus constitute poles in an ideological complex basically composed of Utopian projects that raise the question of the imposition of or resistance to foreign models.(40)

However, Moraña, like most other critics, goes on to conclude that **Love** privileges the romantic pole of this opposition, thereby offering a critique of the kind of modernization represented by Urbino. Yet the poet Ariza is just as domineering and manipulative as the scientist Urbino, and in many ways the two are not opposites but merely two sides of the same coin, just as Emma Bovary's love of literature is revealed by Flaubert to be a vulgar commodification of art that is merely the flipside of her insatiable materialism.

Both Ariza and Urbino make the same mistake--they accept the narratives that inform their lives without question, and this blind acceptance allows them to justify their lack of regard for others. And--like the patriarch, who becomes a prisoner of his own propaganda--both become the victims of their own narratives. Urbino fully accepts the standard nineteenth-century narrative of progress through scientific and technological advancement, and this acceptance not only blinds him to his own pompous and tyrannical attitudes but also to the destruction being wrought in South America by an unchecked and irresponsible development that is destroying natural resources such as the Magdalena River. Similarly, Ariza so fully accepts the narrative of the romantic lover that he cannot see the harm he is doing to others through his inveterate romancing.

Both Ariza and Urbino are, in short, gullible readers, and García Márquez' portrayal of them in **Love** constitutes a powerful indictment of such gullibility. But the book's most powerful statement on gullible reading occurs in the mechanics of the text itself, which seductively lures readers into reading it as a beautiful, poignant, and touching love story while ignoring the many textual instabilities that so clearly undermine such a reading. As with his earlier use of magical realism in works such as **One Hundred Years of Solitude**, García Márquez demonstrates in **Love** that a well-told story can make readers accept almost anything. Despite the instances of unreliable narration in which the narrator seems to be caught in out and out lies, despite the radical disjunction between the content of the book and the romantic *folletín* form on which it is based, and despite the subversive Rabelaisian humor of the book, **Love** still makes for a terrific story.

García Márquez reinforces such readings in a number of ways, most obviously by constructing a story that most readers will *want* to read in a positive way, due to the undeniable affirmation of humanity contained in readings of the book that emphasize the romance of the Ariza-Daza relationship. Indeed, the consummation of this relationship after over fifty years of waiting can be read to offer a commentary on the nobility of the human spirit, and on one level the book clearly serves to affirm the validity of love and sexuality even in old age. Yet this apotheosis of romance is undermined by the text in a number of ways. For one thing, the entire culminating riverboat trip is shadowed by certain ominous notes, including the death of América Vicuña and the reported murder of another couple of aged lovers, also on a boat. Even the long-awaited climax of the courtship turns out to be an anti-climax. When the couple first goes to bed together, Ariza--the sexual adventurer *extraordinaire*--assures Fermina that he has remained a virgin throughout his life because of his devotion to her. Fermina does not believe this outrageous lie, because Ariza's "love letters were composed of similar phrases whose meaning mattered less than their brilliance" (339). Still, that such dishonesty is a standard feature of Ariza's discourse hardly makes it more excusable. Then, the first time the couple attempts to make love, Ariza is totally impotent, and he leaves Fermina's cabin in "martyrdom" (340). Later, when Ariza finally does make love to Fermina, he does so hastily and clumsily, completely without romance or regard for her feelings. She doesn't even have time to undress as he practically assaults her in a scene in which his penis is significantly described as a "weapon" being displayed as a "war trophy." Afterwards, we are told, Fermina "felt empty" (340).

Such scenes hardly support readings of **Love** as a celebration of septuagenarian sexuality, though it seems clear that the target of such episodes is not sex in old age, but overly romanticized notions of sexuality in general. One could also argue that the point of the Ariza-Daza relationship is not sex, but love, though the book tends to suggest that the two are not neatly separable. But even the romance of the ending, in which Ariza envisions Fermina and himself travelling endlessly up and down the Magdalena River, is seriously undermined by other elements of the narrative.⁶ In particular, the river has been ravaged by industrialization and "progress," and has become virtually unnavigable. Ariza's final fantasy of endlessly cruising the river, like most of his fantasies, is an impossible one that fails to take reality into account, and perhaps the message is that such unrealistic romantic visions have themselves contributed to the demise of the river by blinding the local populace to what is really going on in their country.

One of the most striking features of **Love** is that it can remain so seductive as a story of romance in spite of the way in which the text continually self-destructs as a romantic narrative. Much of this effect can be attributed to García Márquez' brilliance as a storyteller, of course, but much of it has to do with the nature of the narrative itself. **Love** very clearly suggests a complicity between the desire of Florentino Ariza for Fermina Daza and the reader's desire for a successful consummation of the text. But the book works its seductive magic in other ways as well, some of which are highly significant as aspects of the ongoing attack on gullible reading. One of the more interesting techniques employed in the book is the frequent use of real historical personages and events, whose appearance in the text tends to create an air of verisimilitude. When we read that Jeremiah de Saint-Amour has played chess with Capablanca (32), or that Juvenal Urbino studied with the father of Marcel Proust (114), or that Fermina Daza was chosen to greet Charles Lindbergh when he visited Colombia (306), there is a tendency for the entire plot to seem more realistic. Similarly, one of the reasons that Ariza is so easily duped by the boy Euclides in the episode of the Spanish galleon is that the story of the sunken ship is made more believable by the existence of specific historical information. For example, Ariza finds records which indicate that a fleet of ships led by the flagship *San José* had arrived in Colombia from Panama in May 1708, and is even able to find documentation concerning the number of ships, their exact route, and the circumstances under which they were sunk (90-91).

Yet there is also evidence that the entire story of the sunken ships was fabricated by a dishonest viceroy in an effort to hide his own thefts from the Spanish Crown (93). Likewise, **Love** is pure fiction, and a careful inspection shows that many of the concrete historical details in the book are impossible, anachronistic, or simply fictionalized. In short, history can be faked, and the reader who unquestioningly accepts official narratives of historical events is liable to be just as deceived as is Florentino Ariza in his reading of bad romantic poetry. Indeed, **Love** is principally a book not about romance, but about history and politics. Totalitarianism and

imperialism thrive on the blind acceptance of their official narratives, and the gullible reading of these narratives by an unsuspecting populace makes their domination all the easier. The saccharine surface of *Love in the Time of Cholera* conceals a series of diabolical textual traps in a dynamic of duplicity very similar to that so familiar to victims of domination and dictatorship everywhere. García Márquez presents a narrative so seductive as to be almost irresistible, yet so complex as to be largely lost on those who fall prey to its seduction. The message is clear: even the best readers (and the most alert citizens) are ever in danger of being duped by a good story, whether that story be contained in a book of fiction or in the proclamations of a tyrant.

Notes

¹Paul de Man's update of the Marx Aveling English translation of this passage reads "having at the time of the cholera distinguished myself by a boundless devotion" (253). The translation is quite literal, Flaubert's original French reading "s'être, lors du choléra, signalé par un dévouement sans borne" (408).

²García Márquez' title presumably refers to the fact that the aged lovers Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza end the book, together at last, sailing endlessly up and down the Great Magdalena River on a riverboat which flies a cholera flag to discourage other passengers from coming aboard. There is a secondary resonance in the title which indicates the way that love sometimes endures despite negative developments (such as cholera epidemics) in the world around it. But the incongruous juxtaposition of "love" and "cholera" in the title also functions as a hint that the book's love story may not be quite what it appears.

³On this aspect of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* see Conniff.

⁴Note, for example, his enthusiasm over the impetus given to his career in recent years through a switch to a personal computer for the composition of his texts (Williams 134).

⁵It is, of course, quite possible that the unreliable narrator of *Love* has himself exaggerated the number of Ariza's affairs.

⁶See Fiddian for a further discussion of the ambiguity of this ending (198).

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