

Shades of Love in *Love in The Time of Cholera*

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Abstract: As lovers, we pretend perfect symmetry; the language of love is, however, essentially asymmetrical. Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* (1977) is a philosophical exploration of a lover's inner monologue in which the chaotic flux of emotions that spring from a lover's mind create the asymmetrical space of possibility. García Márquez's *Love in The Time of Cholera* is the tale of a melancholy passion that never rises into oblivion. Florentino Ariza, the protagonist who suffers without adjustment, reenacts in fiction Barthes's psychological mediation. By confronting his relation with time, in terms of eternity rather than future, and by encountering love with wait rather than possession, Florentino, transforms the classical *Liebestod* into a cathartic and transcendental experience.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, García Márquez, *Liebestod*, Love, Roland Barthes

“The tragedy of old age is not that one is old, but that one is young.”
(Oscar Wilde)

Roland Barthes' (1915–1980) *A Lovers Discourse* (1977) holds that the lover's discourse is of “an extreme solitude.” Barthes claims that love is expressed through a love speech spoken by “thousands of subjects,” and yet, it is a discourse that has been “abandoned by the languages that surround it: neglected, belittled or ridiculed by them” (1). Neglected, ignored, forgotten, unfashionable, this is the only means the lover has to confront the Other and the world. The *Discourse* is a deconstruction of the human experience of love, an anatomy of desire in the form of short essays or fragments. It provides an imaginary of love for those who recognize themselves in it. It is an utterance rather than an analysis, a personal speculation rather than an analytical study. Overall, not a work of criticism but an encyclopedia of affects told from the “I” perspective. “The dominating (the only) scene of the *Discourse* is, indeed, a representation

of the ideal-ego, of an image that lies at the source of his desire to write which precedes all writing” (Ulmer 70). But because love is a universal experience, the figures that Barthes describes have universal significance. Barthes’ project is not set to explain the philosophy of love, but to rearrange love through images, figures, and fragments. Similarly, Florentino Ariza, the male protagonist in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1988), [*El Amor en los tiempos del cólera* (1985)], believes in the philosophy of love he has found in the literature he reads and writes.¹ Since his first letter in which he promises “his perfect fidelity and everlasting love” (37), his mind and heart are consistent with boundless love because “love is the only thing that interests me” (109). However, if we deconstruct the novel, his belief in infinite love emerges into kaleidoscopic images that map out manners of loving.

With this in mind, this paper will be restricted to bringing into consciousness Florentino’s essential representations of love based on the image-system already offered by Barthes. *El Amor* is clearly a love letter, a text about love, a lover’s discourse in which the final union between the two protagonists is only the final piece of a much larger love-puzzle. Barthes’ imaginary, therefore, can be applied to describe and understand Marquez’s protagonist’s once-in-a-lifetime-experience.

Published in 1985, *El Amor* is the first novel to be published since García Márquez was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982.² It is the archetypal of a South American tale, “one of the great living classics of the Spanish language” (Monsiváis, 38). Perhaps because of its magnitude, it is a novel that cannot be easily classified. It is not a work of magic realism with marvelous arising “from an unexpected alteration of reality” (Carpentier 86) or magic that “refers to any extraordinary occurrence and particularly to anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational science” (Bowers, 19). Besides a parrot capable of singing the Gospels and classical music, and the ghost of a drawn woman, the text moves within the realm of possibility. However, neither is a work of realism as defined by the great European tradition, “the serious treatment of everyday reality” (Auerbach, 517), that is a detailed description based on im-

¹ *El Amor* is the Spanish abbreviation for *El Amor en los tiempos del cólera*. I will refer to *El Amor* also as abbreviation for the English title *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

² Marquez considers his parents as the novel’s source: “In reality it’s my parents’ love story. I heard my father and mother both talk about these love stories. That’s why the story is set during the period of their youth, although I put much of the story back even further in time. My father was a telegrapher who also played the violin and wrote love poems” (Williams 138).

personality and objectivity.³ Along with the hyperbolic style proper of much of Marquez's writing, the history of Colombia blends with the cabinet of wonders proper of Latin American fiction.⁴ Stephen Mint and Jones Brooksbank have considered the text as a net of stereotypes from popular literature: "the novel deals confidently in cliché and improbable exaggeration, searching for truths about emotional life" (Minta, 126). Brooksbank takes this further transforming a common eroticism, or a romantic fancy, into material for feminist criticism: "clichéd encounters between men and women which seem to have very little to redeem them in feminist – and arguably in human – terms" (637). Robert Nana Baah considers the text in its historical significance as a transition from pre-modernity to modernity, and as a personal experience in which the past might be a threat to a fulfilled self: "it is safe to say that *El amor* is both a novel of the past and the future; it recalls the past at both the collective and personal levels with a view to reevaluating its usefulness to the present and the future" (210). The notion of aging and death are all along present. Isabel Borland claims that "*El amor*'s thematic core illustrates not so much a story of love as it does a story about man's vulnerabilities against the passing of time and the effects of aging" (177). Some critics felt uncomfortable with the idea of two elders' physical passion.⁵ A wrinkled face and an aged body do not legitimate intimacy. It is difficult to explain why aging must come with social norms, an indeed it does not. Later life is as much subjective as the earlier one. Besides the tension between different perceptions of sexuality, the consummation of

³ Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis* rightly considers nineteenth century France as the cradle of modern realism. The full quotation is: "The serious treatment of everyday reality, the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic-existential representation, on the one hand; on the other, the embedding of random persons and events in the general course of contemporary history, the fluid historical background -these, we believe, are the foundations of modern realism" (517).

⁴ Rather forcibly, Robin Fiddian draws a parallelism between *Love in the Time of Cholera* and Flaubert's texts *Madame Bovary* and *L'Éducation sentimentale*: "They include the problematic relationship between essence and appearance, the conflict between an individual's private aspirations and the established norms of public life, the view of reading as an 'insatiable vice' [...] which distorts our perception of ourselves and the world and, lastly, the theme of disillusionment, illustrated most strikingly in the experience of Doctor Juvenal Urbino who, on the very last day of his life, discovers distressing truths about his friend, Jeremiah de Saint-Amour. [...] Florentino Ariza's acknowledgement of 'the fallacy of his own life' [...] two years later is a similarly chastening admission of error" (174).

⁵ Francisco Lemos Arboleda, a reviewer for *El Pais*, a Colombian newspaper, accused the novel of being pornographic: "A chain of repugnant and sick sexual passions" (Palencia-Roth 54).

Florentino and Fermina's passion, which takes but a few lines, is not what the novel is about. The text is not about youth's concupiscence, nor about a lustful old man. It is a love story in the winter of life.

In terms of narrative design, the story of a first unrequited and late-requited love is set on the Caribbean coast in northern Colombia, pastel-painted location which was once "the habitual residence of the viceroys of the New Kingdom of Granada" (35). Santa Marta, most luckily Cartagena, once a major Spanish garrison and key port of Spain's Caribbean fleet.⁶ Multiple narrative voices recount the same experience from different perspectives over a period of about fifty years, beginning from 1880 to about 1930. The reader is given a love triangle between Florentino Ariza, Fermina Daza, and Juvenal Urbino. At the age of seventy-six-year-old Florentino finally consummates a lifetime's love for Fermina Daza, by now seventy-two, who had broken their engagement "fifty-one years, nine months and four days" (70) before. The novel incorporates three temporal perspectives: first is Florentino's and Fermina's short courtship within a period of some two years. Next is some fifty-sixty years in which Florentino and Fermina lived apart. Seemingly they become strangers to each other, they mature, become aware of sex, and grow old. Last is the present time of their final reunion with the couple sailing away on the Magdalena River on a ship cruise that is to last "forever" (225).⁷

Love in the Time of Cholera is a novel about writing in which letters are exchanged and action develops through written words.⁸ From the plot's perspective, letters are the only means Florentino has to say: 'This is what I am.' He writes his desire, which is infinite, in the space of a letter, which is finite. Thus, he writes endless letters. However, if we consider the text *sub specie aeternitatis*, the letters not only mediate the distance between Florentino and Fermina, but as Isabel Borland already noted, they function as literature. Indeed, it is through letters that Florentino becomes aware of being a writer, his writing defines his process of Bildung making of *El Amor* a Bildungsroman in the classic tradition.⁹

⁶ The city in *El Amor* "is a composite image of Cartagena de Indias, Santa Marta, Barranquilla and other locations on the Caribbean coast" (Fiddian 170).

⁷ Baah notes that Marquez named the steamboat "Nueva Fidelidad" (lit. new alliance) after "Fidelidad" the first steamboat to sail the Magdalena River back in 1824.

⁸ Isabel Alvarez Borland (1991) reads *El Amor* as a self-reflexive text. Her valuable study comes with a bibliography on reader response theory and reflexivity (notes 1 and 4).

⁹ Bildungsroman is the combination of two German words: *Bildung*, meaning education, and *Roman*, meaning novel. Seemingly, *Bildungsroman*, as a 'novel of education,' deals with the

Why writing? “To acknowledge the Unbearable: this cry has its advantage: signifying to myself that I must escape by whatever means” (D 140–141).¹⁰ Florentino is a man who lets love become an obsession; obsession seizes him, he sacrifices his life for the object of love, thus, he “suffer without adjustment, [...] always bewildered, never discouraged” (D 141). Florentino escapes by writing, and by writing he brings her back into his discourse: “he always behaved as if he were the eternal husband of Fermina Daza” (129). It is an imaginary correspondence, that he conceives as a relationship of some three thousand letters in three volumes to an anonymous reader that is her, about something that is nothing: “I have nothing to tell you, save that it is to you that I tell this nothing” (D 157).

Marquez designed two characters at the antipodes. Florentino Ariza is at times a pathetic aging man regarded compassionately as “a solitary man in need of love” (100). And at times, a romantic hero meant to overcome adverse fate and the hostile world. He cut himself off from society by finding refuge in a lighthouse (64) as if he were victim of a shipwreck (114). Reminiscent of the knights of chivalry, he sings to the woman he loves the “impossible maiden” (40) as French troubadours would do; he writes to the lady whom he idealizes as in the literary tradition of Courtly Love. Love is related to a fascination for the unknown: “I cannot classify the other, for the other is, precisely, Unique, the singular Image which has miraculously come to correspond to the speciality of my desire. The other is the figure of my truth” (D 3). Freud and Barthes would classify Florentino’s behaviors as pathological: “[t]his rebellion is sometimes so intense that the subject may reach the point of rejecting reality and clinging to the lost object by means of a hallucinatory psychosis of desire” (D 109). Admittedly his obsession goes thus far that the old Florentino, already 76 years old, recreates the young Fermina in the 14-year-old América Vicuña, a relationship whose nature Florentino seems to ignore, but that Marquez does not refrain from labeling as a “restorative perversion” (177). Nevertheless, beside the pathological aspect of it, there is a Neoplatonic side that should not be overlooked. What Florentino does throughout his life, is recreating in Fermina some sort of Platonic ideal of beauty and truth: “Little by little he idealized her, endowing her with improbable virtues and imaginary sentiments” (40). To him, she epitomizes spiritual beauty, embodiment of eternal values and secular

formative years of the main characters, the changes they go through before reaching adulthood, their psychological development, moral education, and social entanglement.

¹⁰ Barthes: *A Lover’s Discourse*. Hereafter abbreviated *D*.

virtues. Fermina Daza, on her side, as in the tradition of Courtly love, is the muse, the creative force that allows Florentino to be and to create. But she is also a pragmatic woman typical of Marquez's narrative. As the novel closes and she accepts him back in her life, Marquez has Florentino recalling bygone afternoons spent in the park some fifty years before (idealism) and has Fermina, almost trivially, remarking: "Why do you insist on talking about what does not exist?" (204).

For the sake of the same pragmatism, Fermina married Dr. Juvenal Urbino. Marquez hints that Dr. Urbino chose Fermina Ariza out of vanity, as a social adornment: "[h]e was aware that he did not love her" (105). Fermina, on the other hand, had a spontaneous, and never explained, antipathy toward him since the start. However, common sense brought to her new expectations. Orphan of mother, with a father with whom she shares no more than good manner, ("her relationship with her father had lacked affection since the expulsion of Aunt Escolástica" (87)), expelled from the school, about to be bankrupted ("We are ruined," he said. "Total ruin, so now you know" (*ibid.*)), and most of all lonely: "thinking of the countless years she still had to live" (91). In virtue of her status, Fermina transforms antipathy into acceptance. Marquez is adamant on the topic: "[b]ut in the long run, neither of them had made a mistake" (105). With the practical nature of the relationship and the length of it, Marquez might be suggesting that the marriage's model is based on cooperation: "[i]t is a relationship that has found its best moments in a carefully contrived harmony of apparently mutual support, but it has never quite passed beyond that" (Minta 140). Indeed, the two protagonists are well aware of it: "[n]either could have said if their mutual dependence was based on love or convenience, but they had never asked the question with their hands on their hearts because both had always preferred not to know the answer" (22). Simultaneously, Marquez through Dr. Urbino, admonishes the listening Fermina, at large the reader, that stability is not synonymous with happiness: "[a]lways remember that the most important thing in a good marriage is not happiness, but stability" (194). And because love is correlated to happiness (and unhappiness), Marquez had to invent Florentino Ariza.

Shades of Love

Adolescent love, mature love, love at older age. Love between an old man and a young virgin, love with prostitutes. And then epistolary love, platonic love, erotic love. Love that is selfless, masochistic, and customary. Love as absence, wait, and jealousy. Love is a cataclysm, a martyrdom, an instance of madness, a pain in the heart, fulfillment and dependency, an agony, a silence, a fever, a disease, and a rebirth. But it always begins in magic. “Garcia Marquez’s world becomes magical, phantasmagorical, lifted and splayed by the unpredictable powers and forces of the imagination” (Carney 102). In *Love in the Time of Cholera* Marquez’s world controlled by magic is rendered uncontrollable because of love. Florentino has found in love an alternative to question his fate, and life has assumed an alternative significance. Barthes’ speculation about love refers to love as a candle in an Italian Church: “[h]e was surprised by the flame’s beauty, and the action seemed less absurd. Why henceforth deprive himself of the pleasure of creating a light?” (D 164). Yet Florentino’s love (flame) soon was confronted by *obstacles*, namely Lorenzo Daza, Fermina’s father and Dr. Juvenal Urbino.¹¹ They both embody class consciousness. Lorenzo’s main concern in life is social advancement; thus, he tries to dissuade Florentino from pursuing his daughter due to his unacceptable background and illegitimate origins: “[t]he only thing worse than bad health is a bad name” (55). Dr. Urbino is designed to be a caricature of the educated Latin American educated class, victim of his own education: “a poor devil made bold by the social weight of his family names” (134). He studied in France, he took his wife to Europe for the honeymoon, he admires anything that is European. He gave Fermina social power and wealth, yet while he is surely a model of those class qualities Lorenzo Daza seeks for his daughter, the reader perceives him more as a rival than an enemy. In Florentino’s imaginary discourse, the Other is always Fermina never her husband.

Florentino is simply not loved back. “But why is it that you don’t love me? How can one not love this me whom love renders perfect?” (D 186). Unlike Barthes, Florentino never asks why. He does not surrender but he does not seem interested in digging into Fermina’s decision. The reader takes for granted Hildebranda’s words “[h]e is ugly and sad” (86) and those of Fermina. It was, after all, a “chimera” (69). Deception is what we call what remains of a love

¹¹ Note to the reader: the word “obstacles” is marked in italics because this is one of the features of love I discuss in the manuscript. All of them will be stressed in italics.

story, an episode endowed with a beginning and a final withdrawal. Thus, love becomes *absence*.

In the whimsical phenomenon of love, absence is related to the other, it “can exist only as a consequence of the other” (D 13) that is to say, it is ‘the Other’ to leave while ‘I’ remain. Therefore, absence turns to abandonment: “[a]morous absence functions in a single direction, expressed by the one who stays, never by the one who leaves” (*ibid.*). *I* is present, *you* is absent. Florentino’s relationship with Ausencia Santander, “the apotheosis of incomprehensible absence” (Brooksbank 643), seems to typify this version:

As soon as he had done that, she attacked him without giving him time for anything else, there on the same sofa where she had just undressed him, and only on rare occasions in the bed. She mounted him and took control of all of him for all of her, absorbed in herself, her eyes closed, gauging the situation in her absolute inner darkness, advancing here, retreating there, correcting her invisible route, trying another, more intense path, another means of proceeding without drowning in the slimy marsh that flowed from her womb, droning like a horsefly as she asked herself questions and answered in her native jargon; where was that something in the shadows that only she knew about and that she longed for just for herself, until she succumbed without waiting for anybody, she fell alone into her abyss with a jubilant explosion of total victory that made the world tremble. (116)

Florentino has been here reduced to a body without a voice, to an extent that his presence is merely instrumental for her to fill “her abyss.” The widow of Nazaret, Florentino’s first bedroom love, is another example of absence. Their intercourses were “without pretensions of loving or being loved” (99–100), although in this case, as in many others, to be absent is not ‘you’ but love. Of course, who is truly absent is Fermina Daza, “[t]hat was always the case: any event, good or bad, had some relationship to her” (94). Barthes suggests that forgetfulness is the only remedy: “I am, intermittently, unfaithful. This is the condition of my survival; for if I did not forget I should die” (D 14). Because Florentino is incapable of forgetting, he must live in excess. He loves as Jeanne Julie Eleonore de Lespinasse once wrote: “I love you as one should, to excess. With folly, delight and despair” (106). Extreme is not only the feeling itself but also his will: “Florentino Ariza, on the other hand, had not stopped thinking of

her for a single moment since Fermina Daza had rejected him out of hand after a long and troubled love affair fifty-one years, nine months, and four days ago” (38). The excess of his power of remembrance brings in another excess: need. “Absence is the figure of privation; simultaneously, I desire and I need. Desire is squashed against need” (D 16). Unlike Barthes, who believes that “the lover’s discourse is in a sense a series of No Exits” (D 142), in order to fill the immense vacuum Fermina has created, Florentino adjusts to different solutions.

Unexpectedly, and without glory, Florentino loses his virginity, which he was preserving for Fermina, to someone whose face, he, symbolically, never saw. It is then he realizes that “his illusory love for Fermina Daza could be replaced by an earthly passion” (94). Later, in the transient hotel of pleasure, the only place where he did not feel alone, he discovered “the secrets of loveless love” (52). Throughout his life, while waiting for Fermina, Florentino kept a detailed account of all six hundred twenty-two long-term affairs he had, a record in which nameless women went under the impersonal label of “Women” (100). Clearly, Marquez ironically remarks, without counting fleeting sexual encounters “that did not even deserve a charitable note” (101). Accusations of sexism, objectivism, and patriarchalism have here no room. Barthes’ lover wonders whether his utilitarian approach to sexuality might hurt someone else: “if I could manage to confine myself to the lively pleasures the other affords me, without contaminating them, mortifying them by the anxiety which serves as their hinge?” (D 50). On the contrary, Florentino is too grounded in his personal drama to be concerned with someone else’s life. As it is far from Marquez’s intention to confront the reader with all too familiar images of exploited and humiliated females. Florentino’s life is not meant to be decoded as a libidinal discharge with nameless women, instead, *El Amor* has to be conceived as a desperate love song. Rather than physical allure, the text portrays a vulnerable idealist in which love is a state of grace always to be reached. Florentino searches for a way out from the duality he is chained to: he cannot submit to the idea of having lost her nor can he cut himself loose. Accommodation is impossible.

For right or wrong, Florentino believes to have been loved, humiliated, and abandoned. “As a jealous man, [...] I allow myself to be subject to a banality: I suffer [...] from being common” (D 146). And Florentino, unique in his extreme feeling, cannot avoid being common. On the deck of the vessel that is taking him elsewhere, he knows she will be a married woman in a few days. “Jealousy took possession of his soul” (96) arriving to wish her death before repenting of his own wickedness. The lover, Barthes implies, considers the love object

as Whole. On the only two occasions Florentino could speak to Fermina he stammered to express himself for the Whole cannot be expressed. Therefore, once he loses her, additional solution, he begins his fifty-one years and nine months and four days of *waiting*.

According to Barthes, the lover's waiting assumes different stages: violent, enchanted, anxious, and delirium. As in the case of absence, the other never waits: "[t]he lover's fatal identity is precisely: I am the one who waits" (D 40). Since the first letter he sent to Fermina, Florentino's life has been a wait made of anxiety of abandonment, explosion of grief, and a fantasy. In truth, while not at any stage does Fermina doubt her choice, his capacity for illusion is so embracing that he wonders whether her "pitiless indifference might not be a subterfuge for hiding the torments of love" (150). Someone might question whether Florentino's wait had anything to do with love after so many decades. Barthes finds a direct connection, "Am I in love? –Yes, since I'm waiting" (D 39). So one might say that whenever there is waiting there is interest. In point of fact, her absence did not lower Florentino's desire, instead, desire stretched itself along two centuries:

For the first time in the interminable twenty-seven years that he had been waiting, Florentino Ariza could not endure the pangs of grief (125)

only then did he realize that his life was passing. He was shaken by a visceral shudder that left his mind blank [...] "Damn it," he said, appalled, "that all happened thirty years ago! (142)

the one he had waited for from one century to the next without a sigh of disenchantment (168)

I have waited for this opportunity for more than half a century, to repeat to you once again my vow of eternal fidelity and everlasting love (37)

Florentino waits but waiting is a *grief*. Fermina is not coming back, she does not belong to him, he feels poor, ugly, inferior, and unworthy. "The anxieties are already here, like the poison already prepared (jealousy, abandonment, restlessness)" (D 29). Florentino's agony is rooted in the very origin of his love; the moment he first saw her, he had already lost her. When love is denied "it is an unhappiness which does not wear itself out in proportion to its acuity" (D 146). Pain, for the lover, is the daily repetition of denial. In this sense, Florentino

has suffered for fifty-one years with its days and nights. The only escape he knows is abnegation. Thus, he sacrifices his grief for the vainglory of his exalted dream. A madness in which love itself is the founder.

Florentino is in a condition of existential *dependency*, subjugated to the love object. He tried to leave for some sort of self-imposed exile which did not last more than a few days: “never again would he abandon the city of Fermina Daza” (98). Marquez describes Florentino’s condition as one of delirium, Barthes takes the notion of delirium to a universal stage: “[a]morous passion is a delirium; but such delirium is not alien; everyone speaks of it, it is henceforth tamed” (D 106). Considering the prospect of taming delirium even possible, Florentino never returns to himself for he never loses his delirium. The love object never died nor it went elsewhere remote from his view. Florentino, therefore, suffers twice as much. He suffers from the fact that she is present, consistently reminding him that she is not his; and he suffers from the fact that she is dead in the sense that dead is the love once she bestowed on him. Florentino is wretched. He lives in a state of constant insomnia, everlasting mourning, yet his loss remains abstract because Fermina is not dead but only lost as an object of love.

He lives at the edge of *catastrophe*. The amorous catastrophe, Barthes claims, is “without remainder, without return: I have projected myself into the other with such power that when I am without the other I cannot recover myself, regain myself: I am lost, forever” (48). The sentiment Fermina provoked when he first saw her has set in motion the narrative of his life, one of fulfillment or despair. And when despair taps the silence of his nights, he replaces the imaginary protagonists of the books he reads with his and Fermina’s face. By so doing love becomes *memory*.

Barthes’ lover recalls the past in the imperfect tense: “[h]appy and/or tormenting remembrance of an object, a gesture, a scene, linked to the loved being and marked by the intrusion of the imperfect tense into the grammar of the lover’s discourse” (D 216). The imperfect tense whispers just behind this present, it is a “tense of fascination: it seems to be alive and yet it doesn’t move: imperfect presence, imperfect death; neither oblivion nor resurrection; simply the exhausting lure of memory” (*ibid.* 217). Florentino lives in the past because Fermina Daza belongs to the past “it was not possible for him to imagine the world without her” (96). Yet it is a past always close to the present. Fermina’s memory never fades, instead it enlarges itself as life approaches its natural conclusion.

Due to the nature of their brief meetings, his memories are episodic and obsessive, he can recover only insignificant features in no way dramatic. She is

to him what Fermina knows he is to her: “the shadow of someone she had never met” (139). Time itself “is a fragrance without support, a texture of memory” (D 216). Scenes continuously form in Florentino’s mind, he pictures all the ‘could have beens’ of his life, always leaving behind a “throb of longing in his heart” (148). But it is in her that he notices the irremediability of time: “for he experienced the cruelty of time not so much in his own flesh as in the imperceptible changes he discerned in Fermina Daza each time he saw her” (*ibid.*). As fleeting images of her pile before him, he is not searching for lost time, he is creating an imaginary realm free of pain. Yet, he still suffers for he loves the Other still. Why does Florentino remember? In line with David Gross, mnemonic traces “provide the foundation stones of experience and allow us to grasp the overall shape and direction of our lives” (13). Barthes would not agree. The lover, Barthes observes, sees the existence of love, not its essence: “I remember in order to be unhappy/happy—not in order to understand” (D 217). Florentino’s few memories of her are enough to give direction to his life. They are the only rumors in a life otherwise made of *silence*.

After Fermina’s rejection, on the eve of his attempted departure to Villa de Leyva, Florentino puts on his Sunday suit and tries to win her over with a serenade he had composed for her. But “the waltz ended in supernatural silence. The balcony did not open, and no one appeared on the street” (92). For those who love, Barthes notes, silence is equal to death: “[i]n those brief moments when I speak for nothing, it is as if I were dying. For the loved being becomes a leaden figure, a dream creature who does not speak, and silence, in dreams, is death” (168). Florentino is disfigured by the persistent silence, his life soliloquy made him a man reserved and austere: “[h]e was another person, despite his firm decision and anguished efforts to continue to be the same man he had been before his mortal encounter with love” (113). And because the silence is broken only some fifty years later, Florentino has lived a life-in-death drifting painfully without existence.

Enchanted and bewitched, each time he is transfixed by the image of the loved object but incapable of breaking the violence of his dream. Florentino is trapped because the solution lies outside his system of belief, however another solution is at hand. “Love nonetheless wants to proclaim itself, to exclaim, to write itself everywhere” (D 77–78).

By *writing* Florentino performs what Barthes calls “denial of separation” (*ibid.*, 109), that is the desperate attempt to hold someone about to die. In the fifty-plus years of his separation from Fermina, not knowing where to put his love and so enraptured by the functional evidence of his dreams, he wrote love

letters for the others. Endeavor that led to the publication of a Lovers' Companion which contains the insights of a lifetime: he wants to understand himself and he wants to be understood. Barthes reminds us that an epistolary exchange implies a dialectic, some sort of mutuality: "[l]ike desire, the love letter waits for an answer; it implicitly enjoins the other to reply, for without a reply the other's image changes, becomes *other*" (D 158). By *other* Barthes implies anyone else, a less important 'you.' However, while such a correspondence is what Florentino never achieves, Florentino seems incapable of coming to terms with the fact that his imaginary correspondence was indeed a perpetual monologue. Arguably, this is the pitiful image of a man eternally resuming the thread of a story in which she no longer believes. In a sympathetic move, Marquez does not allow Florentino to cross the verge of madness. His countless letters betray his world view, one of despair and hope: "he made a fierce decision to win fame and fortune in order to deserve her" (108). As time goes by, Florentino's process of *bildung* develops together with his letters' content. In the end, after Dr. Urbino's death, as he tries to conquer once more Fermina's heart, letters assume a metaphysical tone: "[i]nstead, he wrote an extensive meditation on life based on his ideas about, and experience of" (190). Idealism, the original utopia of his love, has left room for the wisdom given by the age: "[i]t was a meditation on life, love, old age, death" (193). Letters are now typewritten, as if they were meant to be published or as if Florentino was to write for a public beyond her. And if we consider Fermina as the common reader, then her reaction reveals the stature of Florentino as a writer: "they were what allowed her to understand her own life and to await the designs of old age with serenity" (196). In other words, Florentino's letters have become literature. Literature has here the function of offering meaning to the world when the meaning is blurred. While reading Florentino's letters, Fermina understands, that the answers, "[t]here they were, precise, simple, just as she would have liked to say them" (194). So it is that love, in Marquez's final revelation, is, among the rest, a state of *grace*, in Barthes' words an act of "recognition" (38).

Dr. Urbino has been an obstacle to Florentino's love in life as much as in death. After his death the tradition of mourning forbids Florentino any approach to Fermina, consequently, he has to find a new way to break through in his final battle. Fermina is a woman that has already lived a full life, what possible could he offer to make her desire? "It had to be a mad dream" (190). Hence, love skips the prejudices of class, due to which Florentino's dream was denied fifty years before, and becomes infinite: "[i]t had to teach her to think of love as a state of grace: not the means to anything but the alpha and omega, an

end in itself" (190). Anny Brooksbank suggests that at this stage "Fermina takes her place in his fantasy no longer as idealized love, nor yet as equal partner, but as an elderly, surrogate wife" (642). The same Fermina seems to find any attempt at reconciliation somewhat naïve: "[w]hy do you insist on talking about what does not exist?" (204) she asks him. The mistake that both Brooksbank and Fermina are making is assuming the futility of Florentino's nostalgia since it is disconnected from reality. Far from being true, Florentino is not replacing a fantasy with another one, he is, instead, adjusting to his present one. At this stage, Marquez suggests, they are "beyond the brutal mockery of hope and the phantoms of disillusion: beyond love." (22) Beyond love is *fulfilment*.

As Marquez accompanies his protagonists to the end of life, Fermina is ready to forget: "I assume the grief of the relation, I am able to forget" (D 16). As she engages in a "ritual of eradication" (182) by burning in a bonfire everything that reminds her of her late husband, there is a symbolism that the reader should not lose: as Dr. Urbino lies dead in his coffin, she removes her wedding ring and deposits it on his finger. The death of her husband is the end of one life journey and the beginning of another one, thus, she begins erasing traces of him. The parrot is given to the city Museum, the mango tree is cut down, on more than one occasion, she communicates to Florentino that she is "prepared to erase the past" (196). What Fermina does is systematically forget the zone of alarm that separate the time she has left from the previous moments of pleasure. Florentino, on his side, has not changed. In his 70s he promises the same promise of unconditional love. The dream that Fermina had some fifty years before assumes now the significance of a foreshadowing: "[s]he dreamed that she was seeing Florentino Ariza again, and that he took off the face that she had always seen on him because in fact it was a mask, but his real face was identical to the false one" (66). Florentino never wore any mask, he has always been what he wrote. "Truth is what, in the fantasy of hallucination, must be delayed but not denied, betrayed" (D 230). As paradoxically as it might sound, Florentino, by never stopping loving her, never betrayed her. There has never been any displacement in Florentino's passion for such a passion was not one of physical alluring. Instead, what he was searching for was the like of a utopic fulfillment: "a totality without remainder, a summa without exception, a site with nothing adjacent" (*ibid.* 54). Marquez has made of his character a pre-Christianity Saint Augustin to whom he gifted with the subject of his obsession. When Fermina finally allows him a kiss: "Florentino Ariza felt the happiness he felt that night: so intense it frightened him" (217). Barthes recalls a few definitions of the lovers' total union: "the sole and simple pleasure" (Aristotle),

“the joy without stain and without mixture, the perfection of dreams, the term of all hopes” (Ibn-Hazm), “the divine magnificence” (Novalis) (D 226). Love is fulfilled not because it becomes carnal but because it fulfills its aim which is happiness. Love fulfillment is the recreation of that original unity that had been severed in a dual form as told by Aristophanes in the *Symposium*.¹² As for Plato, the one between Florentino and Fermina is a union more spiritual than physical: “despite the disappointment that each of them felt, [...] they were not apart for a moment in the days that followed. [...] They were satisfied with the simple joy of being together” (220). Complying with Barthes’s definition of total union: “[t]he dream of a total union [...] I am no longer myself without you” (D 228), in their 70s, they set for an eternal cruise.

The eternal cruise: an explanation

The ending of the novel is left open for interpretation. My reluctance to impose a reductive or unitary interpretation on *El Amor* reflects a belief in the principle, expressed by Mario Vargas Llosa, that “the richness of a work of art derives from the diversity of elements which it comprises and from the number of readings which it admits” (46). While the text is still an open work that offers additional interpretations beyond the confine of my study, I suggest reading the ceaseless voyage as an escape from the implacability of time by creating the masquerade of eternity.

As Florentino and Fermina are leading toward the consummation of their love a perverse symmetry accompanies their reconciliation. Florentino breaks his ankles making impossible for the two of them to meet for some four months. As they are about to set sail on the *New Fidelity*, the name of which implies “the renewal of love between Fermina and Florentino” (Baah 211), the sound

¹² Aristophanes’ speech (189c–193d) in the *Symposium* is arguably the most famous myth on the origin of love. At first men and women were united they formed one person fully round with the shape of a perfect apple. An androgynous figure “awesome in strength and might” (190b). As Zeus felt threatened by such perfection, man and woman were divided into two halves so to make them weaker. “After the original nature of every human being had been severed in this way, the two parts longed for each other and tried to come together again” (191a). In view of this, love is the attempt to make oneness out of the duality of human condition; we are all continually searching for the other half, we throw our “arms around one another in close embrace, desiring to be reunited” (191b) instinctively searching for the lost intimacy, affection, and original wholeness.

of the ship's horn damages Fermina's left ear, leaving her hearing permanently injured. Soon after a telegram arrives announcing América Vicuña's suicide. I must agree with Robin Fiddian, América's suicide "signifies the intrusion, into Fermina and Florentino's idyll, of disturbing realities of selfishness, cruelty and death" (177). At last, the newspaper reports about an elderly couple being beaten to death by the boatman that was ferrying them to the location where they had spent the honey-moon some forty years before. Seen in this light, Marquez reminds us that love recognizes death as climatic point.

The clock of life is running faster. Florentino had enough to live by but not enough to live for. He spent his life discerning meanings well aware that the meaning was one single woman. Inevitably, his wait is accompanied by aging and aging is a time of loss. The finiteness of life has come to him through physical and emotional limitations. Death has been rehearsed endless times with the loss of the people he loved, memory, and physical strength. There is surely a humanist reading, in the sense that love promotes the value of human dignity in defiance of aging. While Ophelia, Fermina's daughter, is incapable of conceiving love in old age "[l]ove is ridiculous at our age, but at [Florentino and Fermina's] it is disgusting" (209), to Fermina such a love becomes a "miraculous consolation" (205).

In relation to the text, Marquez has often said that he was interested in analyzing love at all ages.¹³ Indeed the touching finale comes as a wise revelation: "[f]or they had lived together long enough to know that love was always love, anytime and anyplace, but it was more solid the closer it came to death" (223). Such an admission from Marquez's side opens a new window of understanding on the nature of love.

The Antillean refugee Jeremiah de Saint-Amour's suicide letter with which Marquez opens the novel is indeed an essential element to decoding the end. "Jeremiah de Saint-Amour loved life with a senseless passion, [...] and as the date approached he had gradually succumbed to despair as if his death had been not his own decision but an inexorable destiny" (15). He commits suicide in the name of life: "I will never be old" (14). Dr. Urbino diagnosis is that of 'gerontophobia,' a word to describe the protest against the unavoidable process of aging, the existential despair before the debris of youth.¹⁴ Simplified to the extreme, Jeremiah commits suicide because, without the beauty of youth, life

¹³ For details see Fiddian (2007).

¹⁴ The term comes from the Greek *gerōn*, 'old man' and *phobos*, 'fear'. Either a disproportionate fear of old age, or aversion to old people.

is not worth living. Confronted by the sympathy of Jeremiah's mistress, who fashions Jeremiah's gesture as heroic determination against the ravages of time, Dr. Urbino's reaction summarizes the Christian view: "only a person without principles could be so complaisant toward grief" (15). But then he concedes, if he had not been Christian he would have agreed "that old age was an indecent state that had to be ended before it was too late" (31). Hence, the reader is given a new area of introspection in which life and love come with limitations: is old age a vital area of the human experience or are we to follow Jeremiah's radical solution? Evidently, Marquez has chosen Florentino's and Fermina's eternal cruise as an alternative to Jeremiah's dark predicament.

Contemplating their nakedness for the first time, Florentino skims Fermina: "her shoulders were wrinkled, her breasts sagged, her ribs were covered by a flabby skin as pale and cold as a frog's" (219). Likewise, he has tried to preserve his physical appearance but he has lost all of his hair and teeth: "she got up before he did to brush the false teeth he kept in a glass" (222). But in some mysterious way, aging is discovering greater depths in living human existence. Aging allows spirituality to flourish, aesthetic sense to expand: "roses were more fragrant than before, that the birds sang at dawn much better than before" (222). Older years offer the opportunity to stand and stare without shame: "[s]he [...] began to undress without false modesty" (219). In agreement with Baah "[r]euniting the two in love in the twilight of life symbolizes a willingness and readiness on their part to start afresh" (211). Thus, Florentino and Fermina face the reality of death and together enter the great unknown. They "drift outside of the fatal couple which links life and death by opposing them to each other" (D 12). Marquez allows them to escape, cholera, prejudice, and time by inventing an alternative to the traditional *Liebestod* that wants love to be completed by death.¹⁵ The mythical cruise that would last "forever" expands love beyond the particular of the human world, to its transcendental realm, and offers the two protagonists a space in which to explore their limits. Florentino's and Fermina's a-temporal cruise is Marquez's aesthetic answer to Jeremiah's

¹⁵ From German *Liebe* 'love' and *Tod* 'death' refers to the literary theme of erotic death or "death of love", in which the two lovers consummate their love in or after death. Examples are Tristan and Isolde, and Romeo and Juliette. An interesting study on the concept of *Liebestod* applied to Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* is in Polka (2013). "So *Liebestod* is properly to be translated, and understood, as the death of love. Still *Liebestod* as the death of love has, ambiguously, a double – a doubled – meaning. First, the death of love is love's death. Second, the death of love is the death that belongs to (that inheres in) love: it is love's death. *Liebestod* is, it turns out, the death of love that is the death of love" (243).

existential despair. "Would it be possible to make a trip without stopping, without cargo or passengers, without coming into any port, without anything?" (221). Florentino and Fermina are left traveling back and forth between their coastal city and La Dorada. The yellow flag indicates cholera cases on board, no one is allowed in, no one is allowed out. Isolated from the rest, from the city, from the prejudice that they might generate, the self-imposed quarantine preserves their newly found love. But the yellow flag also symbolically severs ties with the world which demands life to understand death. Marquez in an epicurean fashion chose life until the very end. Florentino and Fermina, do not win over death but over life. It could not be but the Captain to seal this final wisdom: "overwhelmed by the belated suspicion that it is life, more than death, that has no limits" (225). The never-ending cruise does not grant them immortality. They will die and live on as long as literature does.

Love in the Time of Cholera is an ecstatic celebration of love, a disease no one is immune from. Already Barthes in *A Lover's Discourse* had dissected love into a myriad of shades, the discourse of the lover himself, in which love is analyzed and recreated. However, with distinction. Barthes is interested in the effects love produces on the lovers' mind, specifically, he uses the tools of structuralism to explore how love produces language. Marquez, on the other hand, tells an epic story of passion and optimism. The structural difference lies in the fact that Barthes' discourse has a lover who speaks and a loved one who never answers. With a focus on the language of love, Barthes concludes that words are never quite precise, never quite enough to voice the overwhelming feeling of being in love. All in all, his is a text that highlights the ineffability of love. As the object of desire is always out of reach, the lover's discourse is an unspeakable speech, and therefore, the sentiment of love is one that is meant to crash. On the contrary, Marquez's discourse is more Dionysian, thus he brings the lovers as close as love can possibly go. With a language intense and evocative, the powerful slowness of South American prose seems to accompany the equally slow wait of Florentino. Marquez's narrative explores love's nature in all its facets: consummated and unrequited love, conjugal and adulterous, platonic and physical, angry and jealous, daily and long-distance love, young and timeless love. The agonizing wait for a fairy tale that is not at all obvious compensates the protagonists, and the reader along, only at the very last when old age has now made the enthusiasm of youth fade. Having hoisted the yellow flag of cholera on the ship to avoid inspections, that journey becomes just for Florentino and Fermina the essence of love. As the reader observes the two of them sailing away into shades of love yet to be invented, we cannot but admit,

with fear and wonder, that if to love someone is to be no longer capable of doing without the other's gaze, then what does it matter if to have it we have to wait fifty-three years, seven months and eleven days including nights?

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