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INTERIOR TEXTS IN *EL AMOR EN LOS TIEMPOS DEL CÓLERA*

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> I think that his [the poet's] function is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others. His role, in short, is to help people live their lives.
>
> Wallace Stevens

El amor en los tiempos del cólera published by García Márquez in 1985, is a most successful fiction at the level of plot while it simultaneously provides a comment on the power of illusion by means of embedded texts which are a crucial part of the fictional world of the novel. *El amor* is also a text whose non-mimetic ending subverts its traditional design and in so doing undermines its own affiliation with the parameters of Realism as defined by Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis*—an interest in photographic representation, a penchant for detailed description, and a grounding of the action within a specific historical period. The fact that Fermina and Florentino, the novel's main protagonists, are allowed to escape their predicament by means of a mythical cruise represents an abrupt change from the mimetic way in which the rest of the novel was developed. Moreover, this poetic conclusion provides a clue to the reader about the possibility of a different readability for this novel. My study,

developed within the parameters of recent theories concerned with the relationship between texts and readers[1] proposes a careful look at this novel's interior texts in order to illuminate García Márquez' latest incursion into the meaning of writing and of literature.

Of course, this is not the first time that García Márquez has chosen to end his books in a poetic manner (the ending of *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* also exhibits this same nonrealistic quality by having Santiago Nasar die "twice"), nor is it the first time he has inscribed written documents within his fictions in order to inform the reader about the various notions regarding the acts of creation and interpretation. From Melquiades' manuscripts in *Cien años de soledad* to the myriad documents the Narrator in *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* has to peruse in his investigation of the death of Santiago Nasar, our author has made use of metafictional devices inscribed within the text. Thus the interior texts we find in *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* can be considered in open dialogue with Márquez' previous works as they transcend their mimetic role in the development of the story and take on a crucial role in addressing García Márquez' aesthetics.

What is unusual in *El amor* is the relationship between these interior texts and the story's main events. The interior texts in *El amor* exhibit a plurality of aesthetic functions which differ from the function attributed to writing in *Cien años* and *Crónica*.[2] A brief review of the novel's main events will serve to elucidate my argument.

El amor is the story of a love triangle between Florentino Ariza, Fermina Daza, and Juvenal Urbino. Florentino meets Fermina while they're both adolescents, a short courtship ensues (mostly written) until Fermina is sent out of town by her father. Florentino and Fermina continue to exchange letters during her absence until the relationship is finally broken off when Fermina returns home. Soon after, she marries Dr. Juvenal Urbino and stays married to

[1] Although Iser's work on reader response is seminal for the kind of reading I'm doing here, more specific studies on embedded readers and writers within fictional texts have influenced my investigation. See studies by Walter Ong, Gerald Prince, and Naomi Schor included in Works Cited.

[2] On the role of the manuscripts in *Cien años* some of the best studies are S. J. Levine's, J. Ludmer's, and R. González Echevarría's. On *Crónica* and its metafictive essence, see articles by G. Pellón, J. Olivares, as well as my own study on the subject included in Works Cited.

him for more than fifty years. After Urbino's death, Florentino, who had remained in love with Fermina for more than fifty years, renews his courtship (mostly through letters) and eventually wins her heart. The text concludes as the couple sails away on a ship cruise that is to last "forever."

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.[3] From Jeremiah de St. Amour's suicide (he was a victim of gerontophobia or the fear of getting old) to Florentino's and Fermina's eternal cruise at the conclusion of this text, the characters in this novel are made to confront and to seek their own solutions to the dilemma of age and eventual death. If Jeremiah de St. Amour chooses suicide to confront his predicament, Florentino and Fermina are allowed to escape time through the power of art by sailing in a mythical cruise that would last "toda la vida." Thus, in spite of its traditional story and development, this apparently mimetic story of love is also a story of art and of the aesthetics of literature.

My study suggests that *El amor* is a novel about writing itself—not only in the literal sense, but also in the figurative sense of the post-modern, self-reflexive text.[4] Most of the action in the novel is told to the reader by a narrator who has exclusive access to the contents of the many texts that are exchanged among the characters. Spoken dialogue, "La viva voz" (107),[5] hardly exists in the development of the narrative for primacy is always given to the written word through the indirect accounts of the narrator. Not only is the love affair of Florentino and Fermina developed almost exclusively through letters, but many other incidents in the story are also directly related to the written word. For example, the

[3] As in all of García Márquez' fictional works, the thematic richness of *Cólera* is not limited to one single interpretation or reading. For an overview of this text's thematic diversity, see R. Fiddian's article: "A Prospective Postscript: Apropos of *Love in the Time of the Cholera*."

[4] Much has been written on reflexivity which has directly or indirectly affected my reading of this novel, from Robert Alter's seminal text in 1975 to the valuable studies which followed, e.g., Scholes, Hutcheon, Thiher among a list too long to mention. My own interest in the subject dates back to my participation in a 1983 NEH Seminar on "The Self-Conscious Novel in the Hispanic World," directed by John W. Kronik.

[5] All quotes are taken from the 1985 edition of Gabriel García Márquez, *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*.

reader encounters letters from Jeremiah de St. Amour, Juvenal Urbino, Juvenal's father, and many other secondary characters in addition to the many letters exchanged between Fermina Daza and Florentino Ariza. Finally, visual and journalistic texts also figure in the development of crucial aspects of the novel's mimetic plot—the large fresco depicting Urbino's death has both aesthetic and mimetic connotations (76), while the newspaper which slanders the Urbino household serves to illustrate how language can serve non-creative, destructive ends (464-66).

In order to facilitate our study, the interior texts we find in *El amor* can be categorized as follows:

I. Documents written by Florentino

a) Early letters to Fermina—the apprenticeship of a writer.
b) *Secretario de los enamorados*—a primer for those who wish to write love letters.
c) *Ellas*—an account of the hundreds of erotic encounters had by Florentino while waiting for Fermina.
d) Letters of maturity written to Fermina—a writer's opus.

II. Documents written by other characters

a) Jeremiah de St. Amour's suicide letter.
b) letters exchanged between Fermina and Juvenal Urbino.
c) letters written by Fermina to Florentino.

III. Other types of embedded texts

a) visual text: the painting of Juvenal Urbino's death.
b) journalistic text: the newspaper *La Justicia.*

As I shall demonstrate, these works within the work will serve a variety of functions which comment on García Márquez' aesthetics regarding the nature of the writer's activity (Florentino's development as a writer); the mediating role of the reader (Fermina's reaction to Florentino's writings); and the nature and function of literature (Florentino's letters of maturity and his realization as a writer).

The novel opens with two texts (one written, the other visual) which at first appear to be what they are not. These initial texts (Jeremiah de St. Amour's suicide letter and the canvas depicting Juvenal Urbino's death) function to develop the book's plot while simultaneously parodying the romantic and realistic conventions that shape this novel.

St. Amour's suicide letter is a crucial text not only because it opens the novel but also because it sets forth one of the book's major concerns: the passing of time and the problem of aging. The reader expects that a character with a name such as St. Amour, who commits suicide by poisoning himself with "cianuro activado," would do so in the name of love. However, the reader's expectations are thwarted, for St. Amour's letter is written in the name of death rather than in the name of love. St. Amour kills himself because he cannot survive the prospect of old age with its implications of physical and mental deterioration. His suicide is thus an affirmation of protest against the unavoidable process of aging: "Nunca seré viejo" (31). When his letter is found by Dr. Juvenal Urbino the latter diagnoses his predicament with its scientific name: "gerontofobia" (64). Suicide results, not from the expected broken heart, but from existential despair.

The novel's equivocal beginning by means of this text/letter presents a double challenge to the reader. At the level of plot, it addresses the novel's main questions: is old age a vital area of the human experience or are we to follow St. Amour's radical solution? At the level of process, St. Amour's text is also important for his letter functions as a parody of romantic novelistic conventions (i.e. death by poisoning, a suicide letter, the mystery surrounding the suicide). In fact, this constant tongue-in-cheek attitude on the part of the narrator towards his own novelistic world cautions the reader about the possibility of other readings which might go beyond the story's events. As we shall see, by means of an acute sense of irony (García Márquez' trademark), the conventions of the novelistic genre are constantly debased. This Cervantine (and Flaubertian) technique serves to prevent the reader from becoming exclusively immersed in the text's mimetic plot.

The text's parodic tone is continued with the description of Juvenal Urbino's undignified and comic death. This time García Márquez utilizes a visual text as Urbino's death (which occurred while falling off a tree in search of his parrot) is recorded "en un lienzo

gigantesco de un realismo patético" (76). Juvenal Urbino, unlike St. Amour, is one of the main characters of this long saga, a character who becomes a caricature not simply of the middle-class professional in general, but of the educated Latin American with a rational approach to life, "a man divorced by wealth and position from the realities of political conflict, self-satisfied and self-perpetuating."[6] In keeping with the traditions of his time, Urbino has absolute faith in the power of reason and suffers from a blind admiration of all that is European. Urbino's death, recorded for posterity in a painting, is thus a mockery and a fitting commentary on the pretense and grandiosity in which this character held himself. The painting is significant because, as the narrator tells us, it is later burned by a group of students from the Escuela de Bellas Artes who felt it should not hang in their school as it was reminiscent of a most crude artistic execution:

> Este cuadro se exhibió pocos meses después de la tragedia para que nadie se quedara sin verlo, en la vasta galería del Alambre de Oro, una tienda de artículos importados por donde desfilaba la ciudad entera. Luego estuvo en las paredes de cuantas instituciones públicas y privadas se creyeron en el deber de rendir tributo a la memoria del patricio insigne, y por último fue colgado con un segundo funeral en la Escuela de Bellas Artes, de donde lo sacaron muchos años después los propios estudiantes de pintura para quemarlo en la Plaza de la Universidad como símbolo de una estética y unos tiempos aborrecidos. (74)

This powerful visual text is symbolic of García Márquez' awareness and concern with aesthetic styles and how they've shaped our own artistic perception. The painting of Urbino's undignified fall documents within the text a critique of decayed artistic conventions, a fact which closely parallels at the level of the plot or story the period of historical decline in which the novel takes place (the onset of Cartagena's decline during the years after the War of Independence).[7] Like St. Amour's equivocal suicide, Urbino's depiction leaves the reader with a sense of conflict between what is narrated and how it is told to the reader. Interior texts

[6] For a thorough analysis of the historical circumstances which shaped this text see Stephen Mintha's *García Márquez.*

[7] According to Robin Fiddian, the city in *El amor* "is a composite of Cartagena de Indias, Santa Marta, Barranquilla and other locations on the Caribbean coast" (192).

will constantly undermine the narration keeping the reader simultaneously inside and outside the details of the story.

But it isn't until the second segment of this long saga that the reader meets Florentino Ariza, the forger of interior texts par excellence. Florentino's texts, unlike the two described above, serve a different purpose in the development of the novel's artistic subtext. While his letters are intimately related to the novel's story since most of the communication in this long text takes place through letters, at the level of process these letters function as a journal which traces the development of an artist from his first adolescent writings to his more mature and serious works. Florentino's adolescent texts, provoked by his infatuation with Fermina, become his *Bildungsroman* or record of his apprenticeship as a writer. Florentino's texts are his *raison d'être* and he defines himself through his writings. From the start, his love letters are inspired by his readings and become a kind of creative exercise in the life of the young writer. His life is surrounded by texts, he even works as a telegraphist and it is through a telegram which he was to deliver at Fermina's house that he meets her for the first time. More importantly, the texts and the character of Florentino serve to parody a specific literary tradition. Like St. Amour (romanticism) and Urbino (realism), Ariza is a cervantine character who clearly parodies the ideals of the *caballero andante* and many of the conventions of the literary tradition of Courtly Love. Reminiscent of the knights of chivarly, Florentino has a lady whom he idealizes and for whom he is ready to surmount the worst obstacles:

> Durmió tres noches encadenado por los tobillos en los calabozos de la guarnición local. Pero cuando lo soltaron se sintió defraudado por la brevedad del cautiverio, y aun en los tiempos de su vejez, cuando otras tantas guerras se le confundían en la memoria, seguía pensando que era el único hombre de la ciudad, y tal vez del país, que había arrastrado grillos de cinco libras por una causa de amor. (111)

In fact, if we examine the early courtship of Fermina and Florentino we observe that it follows the dictates of Courtly Love (128), and that the essence of their romance is literary above all else. Florentino lives for his lady, and writes to her constantly even if his first letter of more than sixty pages is never delivered (90). Fermina is his *Diosa Coronada*, a kind of Dulcinea, who becomes a muse, a creative force that allows him to exercise his craft as a writer.

Florentino is also a reader and his formation as a writer is clearly within the genres which are parodied by our interior texts. We are told several times during the narration of his ecumenical reading preferences which range from *folletines de lágrimas* to poetry of the Golden Age (117). We know that his readings nurture, not only his writings, but also his imagination and that it is precisely his penchant for the fantastic that has made him madly in love with Fermina:

> y los dramas tantas veces releídos recobraban su magia original cuando él sustituía a los protagonistas imaginarios por conocidos suyos de la vida real y se reservaba para sí y para Fermina los papeles de amores imposibles. (211)

Moreover, Florentino possesses a fertile imagination and even goes as far as appropriating the fantasies of others. For instance, when Euclides (a young deep-sea diver he meets while working as a telegraphist in the sea port) tells him about the treasures found in the bottom of the canals, he believes all of the fantastic and improbable details of the boy's tale. Florentino proceeds to write Fermina about them and in doing so recreates Euclides' fiction as if it were his own (144). Fermina, used to her lover's imaginative penchant, accepts his accounts of the treasures as fantasy, even though Florentino writes of them as if they were true:

> Estaba tan acostumbrada a sus excesos poéticos que celebró la aventura del galeón como uno de los mejores logrados. (143)

Florentino's writings of love go beyond the letters he wrote to Fermina and no longer can send her once she has broken off the relationship. In the fifty plus years of his separation from Fermina, he develops his craft by writing love letters for others (193, 252) an avocation which leads to a publication called *Secretario de los enamorados*, a kind of primer for those who wished to become skilled at the art of love-letter writing. In addition, he kept a detailed record of the six-hundred sexual encounters he had while waiting for his lady, saving these written episodes in a collection under the name of *Ellas:*

> y con ellas libró batallas históricas pero de un secreto absoluto que fue registrando con un rigor de notario en un cuaderno cifrado reconocible entre muchos con un título que lo decía todo: *Ellas.* Cincuenta años más tarde . . . tenía unos veinticinco cuadernos con seiscientos veintidós re-

gistros de amores continuados aparte de las incontables aventuras fugaces que no merecieron ni una nota de caridad. (226)

Florentino is an author figure, his texts are interior fictions, and through them García Márquez explores the development of a writer. It is through these writing exercises (which surprise and please Florentino for their effect on his readers) that he begins to develop his craft. Thus, Florentino's texts trace the genesis of a style and of a writer who begins by copying his models until he finally finds a style that he can call his own.

Thus far we have seen how the texts written or created by the characters in *El amor* function in a parodic manner in relation to the conventions which have shaped the novel as a genre. We have also seen how the early texts written by Florentino served to trace the development of a writer and his eventual emancipation from his literary influences. Yet the most important function of Florentino's interior texts is to provide García Márquez with an opportunity to meditate on his ideas about literature and literary creation. It is as if García Márquez wants to leave a fictional record, a text within the text containing his philosophical reflections on the power of literary language, the relationship between reader and writer in the creative process, and the overall function and purpose of literature.

After Urbino's death, the correspondence between Florentino and Fermina is once again resumed. However, an important change has taken place in the nature and content of Florentino's texts. He is now aware of the power of his language and seeks a different effect from his words:

todo tenía que ser diferente para suscitar nuevas curiosidades, nuevas intrigas, nuevas esperanzas. . . . Intentó desde el principio un nuevo método de seducción sin ninguna referencia a los amores del pasado. . . . Era más bien una extensa meditación sobre la vida con base en sus ideas y experiencias de sus amores entre hombre y mujer. (425)

Florentino has assumed his role as a writer and he clearly identifies the 132 letters he wrote Fermina as a book manuscript:

El dijo que no eran cartas en un sentido estricto sino hojas sueltas de un libro que algún día le hubiera gustado escribir. (446)

Florentino's mature letters are given a fully metafictive role within *El amor*. We are told that their content (compared to his

earlier writings) is now grounded in reality, and that it is measured and rational (477). Their subject is not personal, rather it is "una extensa meditación sobre la vida, con base en sus ideas y experiencias de las relaciones entre hombre y mujer" (424). Much is made by the narrator about the fact that these letters are now typewritten rather than in longhand. Florentino keeps carbons of the letters before sending them to Fermina, and even resorts to numbering them and giving them continuity by providing a summary of the preceeding letter in each succeeding text (426).[8] Now Florentino is conscious of writing for a public beyond Fermina and he senses his own identity as a creative writer.

On the other hand, Fermina's reaction to his letters is important in our assessment of Florentino's texts for here she embodies the symbiotic relationship between reader and text. By reading Florentino's letters, Fermina is able to understand her own life and to accept its imperfections:

> fueron ellas aplicadas a sus propias experiencias, lo que le permitió entender su propia vida y a esperar con serenidad los designios de la vejez. (438)

Fermina as reader answers St. Amour's challenge to the dilemma of aging for she finds her solace in reading and in the power of language. Fermina's reactions also serve as commentary on how an artist's prose directly affects the reader. At some point during the correspondence, Fermina finds that these letters express what she already felt but couldn't formulate herself:

> allí estaban nítidas, simples, tal como a ella le hubiera gustado decirlas. (433)

A writer's language is the reader's language endowed with a "poder de deslumbramiento" (490), a special creative power which allows the artist to speak for the reader. It is precisely this *poder de deslumbramiento*, or the ability of the writer to dazzle the reader with the magic and power of his creative language that makes this novel's non-closure a most fitting finale. Florentino's and Fermina's atemporal cruise, like the interior texts we have analyzed here, represents García Márquez' aesthetic answer to St. Amour's existential despair.

[8] As with St. Amour's and Urbino's texts, Florentino's writings are placed within a literary tradition and his chosen genre is *la literatura folletinesca*. See R. Fiddian's comments on this subject (192-93).

My investigation of these documents has made evident that in *El amor* García Márquez sees literature as a way for the reader to make sense of the world and as a means to define him/herself as a human being. Márquez provides us with a rich fiction that teaches us about one of the author's major concerns: the value and function of literature for the common reader. Reminiscent of Wallace Stevens' description of the modern poet, García Márquez provides us with a fictional world which presents the writer as someone capable of making his imagination that of his reader (Stevens 977).

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