

Inverting the Fall

GEORGIA HALLIDAY

“**I**t was inevitable: the smell of bitter almonds reminded him always of the fate of unrequited love” (11). From the beginning, Gabriel García Márquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera* is scented with almonds and inevitability; those first three words preface not just the gorgeous opening sentence but the entire novel. The story launches off this diminutive springboard, its path unpredictable but destined for an inevitable conclusion. This opening scene, which involves neither Florentino Ariza nor Fermina Daza, the story’s two principal characters, seems an oblique way to begin a novel about a pair of lovers. But one thing leads to another, a death to an anniversary party to a Francophone parrot to another death, to another funeral, to a declaration of undying love, with a seemingly infinite number of digressions between. Dazzled, we find ourselves borne by an invisible current through a swamp of anecdotes, family trees, myths, idiosyncratic details, philosophical asides and colonial history. We don’t know it yet, but that phrase, “It was inevitable,” reaches all the way to the novel’s final sentence, a pronouncement made by Florentino as he contemplates spending the remainder of his days with his lover, sailing up and down the Magdalena River: “Forever” (348).

The inevitability of Florentino’s happy ending is striking, and not only because it comes after fifty years and the death of the husband of the woman he has loved since his youth. During the period between his beloved Fermina’s marriage and her husband’s burial, Florentino carries on love affairs with more than 600 women. Several of the more notable ones end tragically or even fatally: one woman’s husband slits her throat with a razor when he discovers evidence of her infidelity; another, the fourteen-year-old América Vicuña, commits suicide when the seventy-year-old Florentino finally runs off with Fermina. Despite these and other crimes, Florentino remains guiltless and unpunished throughout the novel, and we feel that his reunion with Fermina at the end is tender, necessary, and thoroughly deserved. Such are the rules of this universe.

Love in the Time of Cholera takes place in a world that resembles ours only on the surface. *Cholera*-Colombia has the same civil wars, the same social strata, the same swamps and hinterlands as real-Colombia, but the resemblance ends there. If we pry apart the pieces of the beautiful world that García Márquez has constructed, if we inspect the flower petals, the raindrops, the barefoot soldiers on the pier, the widows who receive Florentino in their bedrooms at night, we discover a world very different from the historical turn-of-the-century Colombia. García Márquez is fond of the word *ajeno*, which can be translated variously as “belonging to other people,” “unconnected,” “beyond our control,” or simply “strange” (*Word*). Between each moment in the ordinary life of the novel’s unnamed Colonial port city, something from this *ajeno* world of García Márquez’s invention intrudes. John Berger eloquently describes the relationship between two similarly concurrent worlds—Heaven and Earth—in his essay “Steps Toward a Small Theory of the Visible”: “I imagine this heaven as invisible, unenterable but intimately close. . . . To find it—if one had the grace—it would only be necessary to lift up something as small and as at hand as a pebble or a salt-cellar on the table” (106). This image of two coexisting spaces, one “invisible” and “unenterable” but nevertheless present, resembles the *ajeno* world of quasi-supernatural laws and inevitabilities that infuses *Cholera*’s story.

To enter Berger’s Heaven, one need only lift a pebble—but only “if one [has] the grace.” It takes grace to enter García Márquez’s world, too: not the grace of divine forgiveness in the arms of a loving God, but the grace of Earthly love, the grace of the elegant passion that illuminates Florentino’s thousands of love letters—although, for García Márquez, the two kinds of grace may be one and the same. In his final, successful efforts to re-enchante Fermina after the death of her husband, Florentino writes her yet another long series of letters in which he tries to “teach her to think of love as a state of grace that was not a means to anything, but an origin and an end in itself” (390). Florentino exists in this state of grace for the entire novel. Hopelessly enamored of Fermina, he is automatically absolved of all faults of character, all selfish actions that lead to the harm of others. He even claims, absurdly, on the first night that he spends with Fermina, to have “remained a virgin” for her (449). Fermina “would not have believed him anyway, even if it were true, because his love letters were made of sentences that mattered less for their sense than for their power to dazzle” (449). But in a sense, Florentino is as much a virgin as he is innocent of the death of América Vicuña, and for the same reason: he loved Fermina all along. In *Cholera*, love absolves all sins.

Florentino's crimeless, virginal state of grace infuses the entire novel—not with the utterly unworldly atmosphere of Heaven itself, but with the prelapsarian innocence of the Garden of Eden. The most obvious parallels to Genesis occur in the house of Fermina's youth. Her father, Lorenzo Daza, is the undisputed lord and master of the house, although both his origins and his profession are shady and never precisely specified. Fermina's mother is nowhere in sight, having died when Fermina was very young, before Lorenzo moved to the city in search of fortune and a suitable husband for his daughter. The house itself is ancient and half in ruins; the interior patio resembles an "abbey cloister" (79). One fateful day, a barefoot servant leads Florentino past "moving crates still unopened, and bricklaying tools between the remains of lime and clouded lumps of cement" to deliver a telegraph to Lorenzo; at the Patriarch's command, the house is undergoing a "radical restoration" (79). In this abbey-like house, owned and re-created at will by an austere sovereign, a figure of considerable means but no discernible origin, Florentino catches his first glimpse of Fermina and falls madly in love. Escolástica, Lorenzo's sister and, ironically, a Franciscan nun, is the one who first notices and takes pity on the lovesick Florentino. She abets the temptation of innocent, virginal Fermina. When Lorenzo discovers Escolástica's treason, he banishes her from the house with nothing, sending her back to the family's homeland in the north.

This extended allusion to Eden is artful and poetic—as is all of García Márquez's prose—but also frank and unapologetic. The relationship exists in plain sight, and we are free to take it or leave it. The same goes for Florentino's absolution from all his sins: these religious elements are never explicitly justified by either the character or the narrator. They are presented as everything else in the novel is presented: in slow-paced, luminous prose, serenely indifferent to its eventual destination because "it was inevitable." The story is told like a folktale. We feel it has been told many times before, with the details and backstories embellished each time until they have come to almost overwhelm the plot. The characters' actions—whether harmful, careless, benevolent, selfless, or trivial—always seem to be the product of a sort of benign lunacy, rather than any graspable rationale or emotional logic. The story requires further suspension of our disbelief at every moment; we move ever deeper into the dazzling swamp (two favorite words of García Márquez) of the *Cholera*-universe. We must be willing and enthusiastic participants for the story to work; we must trust in its internal logic and cohesion, for the whole thing can be dismissed with a single gesture. In short, we have to want the story to be true, we have to want Florentino to remain a vir-

gin, for his hands to be free of blood, for the resolution of the love story to be truly inevitable, truly deserved. The success of the story depends on our consent.

And why do we consent? Why do we let this world draw us in so completely that we are willing to believe in fairy tales and fables, to forgive manslaughter, perversion, lies, heartbreak? Perhaps because this pre-lapsarian world is immensely appealing, gorgeously painted. Bizarre, fantastic, sumptuous images abound—images we experience with even more vividness in the presence of Florentino, whose romanticism often lends itself to delirious sensory experiences. One evening, he eats his mother's potted gardenias in order to taste the flowers he once saw in Fermina's hair, gets drunk on a bottle of cologne and is found the next morning, "wallowing in a pool of fragrant vomit in a cove of the bay where drowning victims used to wash ashore" (93). Strange sights pass before us without causing any sort of disturbance within the story-world: on a riverboat, Florentino encounters a woman named Rosalba who carries her child in a large wicker birdcage. One night on this same trip, Florentino is pulled into a dark room and "stripped, without glory, of his virginity," by a woman whom he suspects is Rosalba, although we never know for sure. This bizarre assault ends with the woman ordering Florentino to "forget all about it. This never happened" (194). Florentino obeys, and so do we—allowing him to retain his virginity through this encounter and many subsequent ones. In such surreal moments, when García Márquez lifts Berger's pebble, we glimpse the *ajeno* world and are prepared to accept its laws and dictates.

In this world, the limits of what is possible are not removed, only temporarily suspended with the help of that omnipresent magical ingredient—love. The sheer volume of love letters that Florentino writes to Fermina during their courtship exceeds the bounds of reality. When her father takes her away with him, hoping to make her forget her youthful infatuation, Florentino establishes an "extensive brotherhood of telegraph officers" to help him track their journey through the Andes and the northern towns and communicate with her wherever she goes (120). It is left to us to imagine how Florentino has time to conduct all 622 of his affairs while working his way up from obscurity to become president of the Riverboat Company of the Caribbean—and without a single word of his activities getting back to Fermina. The story gives us a sense of the eternity that lies behind everyday life. William Irwin Thompson believes that "eternity surrounds each heartbeat," and we can enter it by "[moving] out of time through the doorway which opens in the interval between each heartbeat" (10). In this exotic, beau-

tiful, supernatural eternity, all the events of the story happen simultaneously. Cause-and-effect can happen backwards: the fact that Florentino won his happy ending makes us believe that he deserved it, that it was inevitable.

But the question remains: what calls out to us in this world—eternal, supernatural, Edenic—that we glimpse through the “heartbeats” of the temporal, everyday world? The story asks us to actively participate in its obfuscation of the ordinary laws of the universe, to be immersed in a dazzling lunacy, and for the most part we are ready and willing. What appeals to us so much about the pre-lapsarian? Why do we so desperately want to return to the time before the Fall?

In the preface to *The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light*, Thompson proposes that the Fall is not simply an event but something that “exists prior to the world of events, both logically and temporally, and so it seems as if it must be The Event, the single action which echoes down throughout all ancient mythologies, children’s nursery rhymes, and modern stories” (9). The Fall as a mythical, archetypal event is certainly present within these mediums, but something within the nature of this myth must also explain our strange obsession with the *reversal* of the Fall and the return to the Garden.

The movie “*Heaven*,” written by Krzysztof Kieslowski and Krzysztof Piesiewicz and directed by Tom Tykwer, concludes with a fascinating depiction of Genesis in reverse. Filippo and Philippa, on the run from the Italian police for murders that she committed by accident, take refuge in the countryside home of one of Philippa’s friends. The pair increasingly begin to resemble each other; Filippo shaves Philippa’s head to disguise her, and they end up wearing matching white T-shirts and jeans. Finally, we see them silhouetted on a hill under a tree at night, indistinguishable one from the other. Their shadows merge as they embrace, and in the morning they awake in each other’s arms. The Carabinieri arrive and raid the villa, but the fugitives evade notice and miraculously slip into a temporarily unmanned helicopter, which Filippo knows how to pilot. They ascend straight into the sky. All we can hear are the beating helicopter blades and, in the end, silence. Pat C. Hoy summarizes the significance of this ascension: “That sunset image—at the Tree on the hill the night before the Ascension—prepares us for the movement back into a pre-lapsarian, pre-Fallen state. . . . The movie offers an alternative to Human Law that could not deliver justice to a woman whose actions were beyond the reach and understanding of a secular Court of Law. Art through its archetypal language transcends human error, offering in its stead understanding possibilities” (3). Like Florentino, Philippa cannot be judged by the ordinary standards of right and wrong, but must be lifted into another

er realm, where something else—in his case love, in hers perhaps God—can deliver justice. Likely, we all seek this understanding, this transcendence of human transgressions.

Sin is intrinsically human. Before sin, Man lived in Eden and spoke to God, who had formed his body with divine hands. The chorus of Joni Mitchell's song "Woodstock" evokes the divine origin of Man while capturing our yearning for a lost paradise: "We are stardust / We are golden / And we've got to get ourselves back to the Garden." We may be dust, condemned in the Fall, but we are also stardust, of celestial origin, and pre-ordained to yearn for Eden. Thompson suggests that "before the Fall into time," The Event, we existed as an "immortal soul" (9). He names this immortal soul "Humpty Dumpty," of all things, arguing that the soul-before-time was egg-like, and shattered when it fell into time. A fragment of this event remains in the collective unconscious and is manifested in the children's rhyme: "Humpty Dumpty is the cosmic egg, the wall, the edge between transcendence and existence . . . neither God's animals nor his angels can put him back into the world beyond time. The human condition is the fallen condition of time and fragmentation" (9). Myths, however, offer us a chance to ascend out of the fallen condition, to re-unify the soul's understanding of the world, to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Perhaps we seek our lost divinity, driven by a deep-set memory of the days when we were stars, unshattered.

Hoy, in the same lecture about the reverse-Genesis of "Heaven," suggests that this lost unity is what fascinates us about pre-lapsarian stories: "Myth begs us to confront the possibility of redemption, or of a return to a primordial state—sometime, somewhere, out there on the astral plane. We harbor a desire, or an instinct deep within us, to think about these matters, to be vexed by the possibilities they suggest" (3). The soul understands truths that the mind can only grasp at, and we spend our lives—entire bodies of art, literature, and music—trying to open small windows into the fundamental forms that lie behind our existence. We reach for the eternity of the soul-outside-time that, as Thompson says, "opens in the interval between each heartbeat" (10).

The Fall possesses a certain compelling gravity. Even while discussing ostensibly non-mythical topics, writers wield its imagery to bring home a point, to make a denouement more profound. John Berger cites Genesis in "The White Bird" to explain his theories on what it means to see: "One finds oneself—without the pretensions of a creator—in the position of God in the first chapter of Genesis. . . . And he saw that *it was good*" (8). E. M. Forster writes about the way great literature allows or compels us to fall into a state

of “anonymity”: “Lost in the beauty where [the writer] was lost, we find more than we ever threw away, we reach what seems to be our spiritual home, and remember that it was not the speaker who was in the beginning but the Word” (84). Mention Genesis, and we are brought back, way back, to the dawn of human consciousness, to the Garden. We were thinking about something very intellectual, the nature of literature or deconstructionism or the artistic process, and suddenly we plunge, down, down, down, like Alice down the rabbit hole, straight down through our individual selves, into the deep, still pond of the collective unconscious.

This effect seems as though it could be manipulated—a surefire way to make the reader think that the author has said something profound. But all these invocations of the Fall ring true and genuine, which makes sense. These writers write about the things that matter most in the world: the nature of art, of sight, of the word. These topics can be expressed only in terms of The Event. The references to Genesis are crucial to the writers’ rhetoric, crucial to our understanding. They lead us along carefully until the crucial moment when they lift the pebble to show us the timeless world that surrounds the printed words.

But the Fall was precipitated by eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. This seems counterintuitive when we consider Thompson’s description of the pre-lapsarian state. Surely we had more knowledge before the Fall, when the soul existed outside time, knowing the past, present, and future at once, when it understood the primordial forms, the archetypes, in their complete, unified form instead of the fragmented way in which we grasp at them now? We have had to spend our entire human existence striving for a glance of what we once apprehended in its entirety. And yet Adam and Eve ate of the tree “and the eyes of both of them were opened” (Genesis 3.7). Whatever we had before the Fall, it wasn’t knowledge, because knowledge requires the fruit, the exile, the shattering of Humpty Dumpty. A soul outside time, before events, entirely unified and omniscient, cannot truly know itself or its components. Perhaps we only realized what we had lost once it was broken and separate—*ajeno*—from us. There must have been an exchange: unity for diversity, apprehension (in the sense of instinctual understanding) for knowledge (in the sense of distinct and articulated thoughts). Do we really think we can reverse the Fall without losing the knowledge we have gained since? Can we really take it with us as we ascend in the helicopter?

Cholera seems to deny the binary nature of the exchange. Despite existing at least partly in some form of Eden, whether it is Lorenzo Daza’s house or Florentino’s state of grace, the cosmology of the world is highly fractured:

Genesis refracted in a prism, with several other myths thrown in. There are multiple Edens, multiple Adams (Florentino and Fermina's husband, Dr. Juvenal Urbino, both qualify). Parts of the story resemble the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice: Florentino serenades Fermina with passionate violin music when they are young, and in their old age his letters bring her back from the near-death of a lonely widowhood. A Persephonic image of Fermina in a Grecian dress with flowers in her hair inspires Florentino to nickname her "the crowned goddess" (59). Florentino's unsuccessful search for someone, or several hundred someones, to replace Fermina during her marriage to another man reads like an inversion of the Isis myth, with a male Isis searching for the scattered pieces of the female Osiris, unable to find the whole. The novel ends with Florentino proposing that the two of them continue sailing up and down the Magdalena River for the rest of their lives while the world around them goes to hell in a handbasket—a distinctly stygian narrative. The novel operates by many laws that can only be pre-lapsarian, but we also find fractured mythology and unresolved ambiguities, pieces of the broken Humpty Dumpty. Does this mean that, according to García Márquez, we can still exist in an Edenic state? Does this mean that we can be elevated to a higher plane by love while still retaining our knowledge *and* our brokenness?

During the elderly couple's trip up the river, Florentino notes with alarm how much things have changed since he first traveled this way. The trees have all been cut for firewood for the riverboats; the environmental degradation has made the river nearly dry up. All the animals have left or died, due to loss of habitat and over-hunting. This is the only part of the novel that seems intended to be disturbing or disheartening. A denuded forest, a drying river, animals driven out: all distinctly anti-Edenic images. And yet, on what remains of the river, past what remains of the trees, sail Fermina and Florentino, reunited at last—in love, and content to sail until the end of their days. It seems paradoxical: an inevitable, eternal love sailing through a degraded and disintegrating Eden. But perhaps the Garden exists only on the boat, surrounded by the mess that man has made of the earthly garden he has been given. The fragment of Eden that has been preserved is kept afloat by the same grace that delivered Florentino into the arms of his beloved Fermina. The ending is all the more satisfying for its inevitability, assured four hundred pages earlier and finally sealed, though we are unsure where, or in what universe, it has landed us. García Márquez keeps us on the divide: both blameless angels and terrible sinners, both unified and fragmented, both Heavenly and Earthbound. We stand on the border, on the line, in the doorway between eternity and heartbeat, and here—by the grace of Love—we will stay, sailing the river forever.

WORKS CITED

- “Ajeno, -a.” Def. 1-3. *Word Reference Spanish-English Dictionary*. Web. 10 May 2011.
- Berger, John. “Steps Toward a Small Theory of the Visible.” *Occasions for Writing: Evidence, Idea, Essay*. Ed. Robert DiYanni and Pat C. Hoy II. Boston: Thomson, 2008. 106-10. Print.
- . “The White Bird.” *The Sense of Sight*. Ed. Lloyd Spencer. New York: Vintage, 1985. 5-9. Print.
- Forster, E. M. “Anonymity: An Enquiry.” *Two Cheers for Democracy*. New York: Harcourt, 1951. 77-88. Print.
- García Márquez, Gabriel. *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*. New York: Vintage Español, 1985. Print.
- . *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Trans. Edith Grossman. New York: Vintage International, 1988. Print.
- Kieslowski, Krzysztof and Krzysztof Piesiewicz. *Heaven*. Dir. Tom Twyker. Mirimax, 2002. Film.
- Hoy, Pat C. II. “Archetypes/Spaces/Syzygies/Eternal Mysteries.” New York U, New York. 23 Feb. 2011. Lecture.
- Mitchell, Joni. “Woodstock.” *Ladies of the Canyon*. A&M, 1970. CD.
- The Bible*. Trans. and notes by Biblica. *Bible Gateway*. New International Version. Web. 10 May 2011.
- Thompson, William Irwin. *The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light: Mythology, Sexuality, and the Origins of Culture*. New York: St. Martin’s, 1994. 3-40. Print.

218 - MERCER STREET