

“The Same Márquezian Patterns”

*Memories of My Melancholy Whores*

Gabriel García Márquez

Trans. Edith Grossman

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It has been ten years since Gabriel Garcia Márquez’s last fiction was published, and with *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* his fans once more can enjoy his idiosyncratic imagination, the mix of realism and absurdity, and the effortless storytelling. The narrator is a rugged misogynist, sometimes called Doctor or Professor, who reaches his ninetieth birthday without, by his own admission, making a meaningful contribution to the world. That he is a columnist, not even a journalist, is a splendid jab.

The novella begins with a sentence meant to be seductive and revealing: “The year I turned ninety, I wanted to give myself the gift of a night of wild love with an adolescent virgin.” It could be argued that a gift such as this costs more to give than to take, especially when one considers the ages of the parties involved. A few pages later the narrator describes Daminia, whose anus he finds irresistible month after month, mounting her once each moon. Yet he wants to aim for something higher: “At one time I thought these bed-inspired accounts would serve as a good foundation for a narration of the miseries of my misguided life, and the title came to me out of the blue: *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*.” But /8/ the only melancholic around is the narrator; the whores, one of whom doubles as an adolescent virgin, are rarely given room to speak, and what they say is filtered through the narrator’s consciousness, so their memories cannot be accurately captured. The narrator’s suggested title is a strangely listless bit of play on Márquez’s part.

At one point the narrator states the purpose of his literary labour: “In plain language, I am the end of the line, without merit or brilliance, who would have nothing to leave his descendants if not for the events I am prepared to recount, to the best of my ability, in these memories of my great love.” Regrettably, the narrator does not acquire brilliance or merit for the telling of his last romance. A tendency toward lame aphorisms is one example of his shallowness: “[L]ove is not a condition of the spirit but a sign of the zodiac” is not worthy even of a fortune cookie; its witlessness may also speak to Márquez’s own writing.

More seriously, the narrator does not discern any real individuality among the women he encounters. They are vessels filled with his notions, and these are what Márquez transmits to the reader. There is no relief from the perceptions of a sentimentalist tricked up as a romantic, and the consequence is deadly monotony. Márquez’s thin tale of the love this ninety-year-old develops for a young woman he christens Delgadina entails mystical encounters with the dead, floods, thunderclaps and the smell of sulphur, as well as unbelievable acclaim for this journeyman writer once he begins using his Sunday column to describe the love he feels for Delgadina. This elevation is a novelistic convenience rather than something the character earns on his own merits.

Those who aren't Márquez fans will find the familiar flourishes and alarums of his style, and the content itself, freshly irritating. Since *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1988), his translator, Edith Grossman, has helped craft Márquezian sentences that have become unconsciously self-parodying. Márquez's style for the past few years, as rendered by Grossman, has been overripe and mannered. When the narrator comments that an incidental figure was once "one of the great trumpet players in Havana until he lost his entire smile in a catastrophic train collision," a reader can legitimately ask if the sentence has any point beyond conveying a vague yet momentarily evocative image. It's overwriting, though that charge has always seemed beside the point with Márquez. But is it too much to wish he had broken his stylistic habits years ago and become more adventurous?

Since *Love in the Time of Cholera* there has been an excess of those images, and too many slight variations on the same tired character types. Here, for example, Márquez has his narrator say: "I have begun with my unusual call to Rosa Cabarcas [the madam who will supply the adolescent virgin, Delgadina] because, seen from the vantage point of today, that was the beginning of a new life at an age when most mortals have already died." On the factual level, the narrator is saying he has reached an advanced age, and is at a new beginning. In the Márquezian pattern, there is often a male figure who has outsmarted (or outlived) most of his contemporaries through guile, exceptional health, good fortune, or some combination of these, and is therefore able to speak from a lofty vantage point, gained not by moral superiority but by weathering the vicissitudes of life. Often this aged man is regarded as odd or old-fashioned. The narrator of *Memoirs of My Melancholy Whores* changes his Sunday column. Inspired by his chaste love for Delgadina, he proposes that "instead of setting the text in linotype it be published in my Florentine handwriting." Naturally, "[t]he response of the public was immediate and enthusiastic..." This minor figure—irrespective of his class or profession—has had little new to offer for some years.

It is an act of will to resume Márquez's latest novel or non-fiction after it setting it down. The sense of having to do one's readerly duty has come to me often since *The General in His Labyrinth*, and now again during *Memoirs of My Melancholy Whores*, despite the book's brevity. Those who have been missing Márquez's fiction will be quite happy with this minor work.

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