

Teaching *One Hundred Years of Solitude* through Talmudic Eyes

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Repetition brings about depth and complexity—that insight comes from a life of teaching. We never enter the same classroom twice; on each occasion, the place is different and so are we, its inhabitants. As a result, the same material, no matter how often it has been covered, changes. To read a poem, a novel, a play, again and again, with successive generations of students is to approach it from new perspectives. Of course, not all texts allow for this recurrence; a majority seem destined for the evanescent present. The classics, on the other hand, are patient; they accrue wisdom over time.

The classroom, thus, is a lab where a text is constantly revalued. For years, I thought the purpose was to reach consensus about it, to agree on its meaning. But with age, my approach has changed. I see the classroom as an ideal place for divergence of thought. I praise students when, with full knowledge of the sources, they develop their own dissenting option. That, rather than consensus, makes them individuals. Disagreement must be reached in a civil and orderly way, with utmost respect to those who see the world unlike us.

To achieve that disagreement, broad parameters must be set. This is where I bring the Talmud, a multivolume compendium of disparate rabbinical opinions about morality, finances, religion, and other topics. What distinguishes it is its emphasis on dissent. Its protagonists—a large cast of rabbis who lived over a millennium—aren't introduced as characters in the traditional sense of Western literature. They are mouthpieces who position their opinions in contradiction to others. The purpose of Talmudic reading isn't to offer the reader a clear and convincing interpretation of a particular issue but, subversively, to display conflicting yet sound arguments for readers to come up with their own viewpoint.

Over the decades, I have returned, again and again, to the pages of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, one of my favorite novels. From its moment of publication, in Buenos Aires in 1967, when it sold out its first printings in a matter of days, Gabriel García Márquez's magnum opus about a small fictional town called Macondo in the Caribbean coast of Colombia seems to have been born a classic. I first discovered it in my native Mexico, in my late teens. Having heard about its lasting value from countless people, I decided to buy myself a copy at Librería Gandhi, on Avenida Miguel Ángel de Quevedo. Before I did it, though, I told my father about it. He said he had a copy and handed it to me—a third printing dating back to around 1968. I took it with me upstairs to my room in my parents' home. I vividly remember that rainy spring day, a Tuesday, in 1981. The setting

where we read an influential book plays a role in how we remember it. The house was in Copilco, a *colonia*, which is how neighborhoods are called in Mexico, west of Coyoacán, in an area near the Ajusco that at one point was covered by lava from the Xitle volcano. I only found out later that Copilco had been one of the most important ceremonial centers in mid-Preclassical Aztec history, in 800 BC. To this day, the neighborhood roots in the past make the novel, in my mind, a grounding tool: it is about my own Mexicanness.

I began reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude* at around 4:00 pm. As I finished the opening chapter, well-known for trying the patience of first-time readers with its quasi-identical family names, I remember feeling a jolt of exhilaration. I promised myself that I would store the book away to prolong the immense satisfaction it was generating in me. I failed to keep my promise, not only then but after the second chapter, and the third and fourth. From there on, I simply gave up any resistance. I completed the novel very late on Wednesday. I hadn't slept a minute, but I wasn't tired. I hadn't eaten a morsel either, but I wasn't hungry.

In retrospect, I had been invited into a life-long friendship, which is the way we relate to the classics that define us. Not that the friendship was easy or straightforward. The novel was portrayed as a kind of Bible of Latin America. Only after I was fully captivated by it did I become aware of the fever that had taken over Latin America since the 1960s: Magical Realism. There remains measurable debate around the concept. The original term in Spanish was *lo real maravilloso* 'the marvelous real,' coined by Alejo Carpentier after a trip to Haiti and described in the prologue to his novel *The Kingdom of This World*. The English "Magical Realism" may more directly be traced to the Spanish term *realismo mágico*, which was applied to Spanish American narratives by a handful of prominent literary intellectuals, including Arturo Uslar Pietri. At any rate, by the time I discovered *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, almost two decades after the Magical Realist outburst, its aesthetics had become suspect. The consensus at the time was that García Márquez had cheapened Latin America by reducing it to a magician's trick box. A new generation of the region's writers reacted adamantly against *lo real maravilloso*, Magical Realism, by claiming that the Latin American novel should be cosmopolitan and not restricted to social types like clairvoyant prostitutes and forgotten generals. Within a few years, they would be known as the McOndo group. Another subgroup, equally critical of Macondo, was referred to as El Crack.

I grew up in an environment where hermeneutics was as indispensable as bread. Squeezing the meaning out of a biblical passage, a medieval piyyut (the word פיוט, a Koinē Greek word that refers to a Jewish liturgical poem chanted in the synagogue) or a French film, was a kind of sport. I didn't read the Talmud until my late teens, but I could identify "the Talmudic concentration" that served as a form of mental acuity. The Talmud is the source of Halakha, Jewish religious law. Until the Enlightenment, in the late 17th century, Jewish communities looked to it for

answers to all kinds of questions in their diasporic life: how to relate to a neighbor, what the dietary laws ought to be, how to communicate with the divine, and so on. It is a text—legalistic and mythological—that positions its anecdotes, characters, and arguments in an ahistorical landscape. To those that are alien to its compact columns on a page and its dense, varying font, it looks impossibly nonsequential. And, indeed, it is obtuse, labyrinthine, and deliberately obfuscating; it is as if its tractates didn't have to surrender their secrets, at least not to passing readers. As years have gone by, I enjoy an activity known as *Daf Yomi*, a regimen of studying a daily page of the Babylonian Talmud, focusing on the Oral Torah (*Haggadah*) and its commentary, known as the Gemara.

Among what I have learned is that coherent narratives, sequential in their form, are only so on the surface. Investigating their multiple meaning necessitates going beyond that surface. I have also come to appreciate the way the Talmud is constructed: in the words of David C. Kraemer in the chapter “What Is the Bavli?” in *A History of the Talmud*, as an intellectual deliberation and an application of storytelling as a tool to negotiate contrasting interpretations (144-78). Agata Bielik-Robson, in her work, looks at the Talmud as a philosophical inquiry. Or as Harry Friedman posits in *The Talmud: A Biography*, the Talmud contains “one million, eight hundred thousand words spanning thirty-seven volumes.” He adds that “although it is concerned with law, it is not a law code... [It] was not written as a book, the people whose discussions it preserves had no idea that someone would come along generations later and edit them into a coherent work.” Friedman concludes that “a characteristic Talmudic discussion contains the opinions of people, who may have lived centuries apart, woven together to sound as if they are having an actual conversation” (2-3).

More rationalistic figures like Moses Maimonides, author of the influential *Mishneh Torah* and the *Commentary on the Mishnah* as well as the controversial philosophical treatise called *The Guide of the Perplexed*, offered a rational approach to the Jewish religion. He believed we might be bewildered by the universe in which we live, but our duty is to sort out its labyrinthine nature by means of a rational exercise that allows us to reach deductive conclusions. The Talmud is also a rational tool, but it doesn't endorse deductive thinking. Instead, it thrives on disagreement.

Using the Talmud and its method as an analytical eye/I, I have taught an advanced undergraduate seminar, alternating each year between Spanish and English (although the original and its translation are required reading in both). With between 15 and 25 students, delving into the mythopoeia of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (we use the 2007 edition of the novel published by the Real Academia Española and the Asociación de las Academias de la Lengua Española), the seminar looks at the structure, syntax, style, and its historical, political, economic, psychological, and biographical scaffoldings in context. Since the Talmud argues

that no two readers might reach the same conclusion in a text, every incarnation of the seminar has brought along its own set of conclusions.

At the outset, I lecture on how the Talmud was put together and highlight a number of themes and leitmotifs, assigning portions from David Charles Kraemer's *A History of the Talmud* for context. I then introduce one particular segment of the Talmud, in tractate *Bava Metzia* 59a-b, known as "The Oven of Akhnai," which has become among the most famous. In recent iterations of the course, students read a "confession" I wrote in 2020 called "Reading the Talmud in Mexico." On the surface, the Talmudic segment is about the topic of purity. A small number of rabbis debate if from a Halakhic perspective a clay oven that is dismantled and put together again loses its purity. Two main debaters, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurcanus and Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah, start by offering their opinion. But as is often the case in the Talmud, the oven cedes its protagonist role and the tension between the two exegetes intensifies as Rabbi Eliezer becomes intransigent. "If the Halakha is in accordance with my opinion, Heaven will prove it," he states. He offers a set of examples designed to persuade Rabbi Joshua that God is on his side. In a decisive refutation, Rabbi Joshua responds: the Torah, meaning the divine word, is not in heaven; it was given to humans, who now need to interpret it. The line "לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הִיא" (lo ba-shamayim hi), pronounced "lo ba-shamayim hi," 'not in heaven,' comes from Deuteronomy 30:12.

At a significant point, Rabbi Eliezer, already desperate in the altercation, invokes God, who descends from heaven to say that He sides with Rabbi Eliezer. But again, Rabbi Joshua announces that God has no role to play in the debate. After a number of other elements are presented, the character of God, resigned to a supporting role, smiles and says twice: "*Nitshuni banai*" 'My children have defeated me! My children have defeated me.' (The line might also be translated: "My children have triumphed over me.) Eventually, Rabbi Eliezer, as a result of his stance, is excommunicated. The tension between him and Rabbi Joshua is never resolved.

Therein, precisely, lies the value of the exchange. Its purpose is to show that two opposing thinkers don't need to resolve their differences; it is left to readers to decide which of the two arguments is the most solid and how any of these arguments might be applicable to other kinds of situations. "The Oven of Akhnai" has fascinated thinkers across history—Emmanuel Levinas and Harold Bloom are among many who have pondered it—for another reason as well: it establishes, in no uncertain terms, that truth, in hermeneutics, isn't absolute; instead, it is shaped by subjective perspectives.

A corollary of this Talmudic episode is that interpretation is a game of opposites but it isn't dialectical, meaning that in the end, the conflicting sides don't resolve their differences. The objective of the rabbinical exchange is to emphasize that disagreement is crucial to understanding a text. Turning this conclusion into a

pedagogical device, the function of the teacher in the classroom is neither to control the truth in the interpretative exercise, nor to bring everyone to the same conclusion. Instead, in a Talmudic discussion the teacher serves as a facilitator of various opinions. A successful student, therefore, isn't the one that parrots the teacher's or any other viewpoint in the classroom, or the one whose interpretation triumphs over the rest by creating a consensus. The successful student is the one capable of sculpting a unique, personal opinion.

The myth surrounding the composition of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has contributed to its mystique. I wrote about it in *Gabriel García Márquez: The Early Years*. A down-and-out journalist with a couple of novellas, a cadre of stories, and an explosive reportage on the corruption of Colombia's Gustavo Rojas Pinilla dictatorship had relocated with his family to Mexico City after itinerant years in Barcelona, Paris, Caracas, and various parts of the Soviet Block. He randomly talked about completing a major novel tentatively called *La casa* 'The House' about a family in a fictional town on the Caribbean side of Colombia. Several of its characters, most saliently General Aureliano Buendía, had made cameo appearances in his writing. But he couldn't gather the stamina and concentration to round it out.

One vacation day while driving a used Volkswagen from Mexico City to Acapulco on a family trip, he told his wife Mercedes (who went by Meche), with their two boys in the back, that the first line had finally come to him. Meche recommended that they turn around. In seclusion for eighteen months, García Márquez drafted the story of Macondo, an imaginary town, and the five generations of the Buendía family whose sequential adventures define it. It was printed in Buenos Aires. Latin America was never the same. The tale unfolds in such a lucid, baroque, almost perfectly designed way, it is as if García Márquez was its scribe, every word, every image, every detail having been dictated from above. The mechanism reminds me of a similarly fabled text: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan."

Early on in the course, after studying "The Oven of Akhnai" to highlight close reading and, more importantly, disagreement as a purpose, I introduce basic information: the history of literacy, folklore, religion, science, technology, warfare and colonialism in Latin America in the 20th century, specifically in Colombia; the social, military, and educational landscape of García Márquez's family; the Boom generation he belonged to (Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, et al, with Jorge Luis Borges and Juan Rulfo as precursors); the novel as a capitalistic artifact surveying middle-class angst and the emotional arch of the bourgeoisie; and the variety of Spanish found in the novel, which is essentially that of Barranquilla, although it is deliberately dressed up in a neutral, accessible fashion that makes it look "standard" in Latin America. I compare García Márquez with Miguel de Cervantes, whose magisterial *Don Quixote of La Mancha* is, in my mind, the other

novel that has shaped the modern Hispanic world in infinite ways. And I specify that the Colombian author was in his late thirties when he embarked on his “scribal” quest to deliver the Buendías saga.

To achieve this, a vast number of articles, essays, academic studies, interviews, videos, and other material directly or tangentially about the book is made available. These include “La novela en Amé: Diálogo entre Mario Vargas Llosa y Gabriel García Márquez” in the book *Dos soledades*, a chapter by Gerald Martin on García Márquez’s memoir *Living to Tell the Tale*, an essay on the ecology of Macondo by Raymond L. Williams in *The Cambridge Companion to Gabriel García Márquez*, and an essay by Ariel Dorfman describing how *One Hundred Years of Solitude* seamlessly interweaves literary and folk narrative forms to recount the history of Latin America. Students pick a cluster (about half a dozen) to summarize in class in brief presentations. I then tell students these are the building blocks of their interpretation. I also present a selection of works by classic authors: Homer, Ovid, Lucretius, Dante, Milton, Tolstoy, Dickens, Kafka, Rulfo, Borges, Cortázar, et al. I compare specific aspects in the work of these authors with García Márquez’s narrative.

There is no single, absolute way to interpret *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. What I want, I tell the students, is to read the novel carefully along with a slew of interpretations and present theirs to the rest of the class, not exclusively about the novel as a whole but about its many parts. I then invite them to be attuned to the miracle of knowledge. For the class is a place of wonder, especially given that information is easily available nowadays. To teach isn’t about acquiring facts, nor is it a passive endeavor. Learning is about exercising one’s mind, applying it to solve our bewilderment in the universe. The classroom is where students find tools for thinking critically. The Talmud argues that while one might be able to educate a fool, that doesn’t mean the fool is able to think fully and independently. The message is that education needs to be fully tailored to a person’s character.

García Márquez’s novel is made of twenty unnumbered, symmetrical chapters. Written before word counting was easily done by computers, the equal length of its various parts is, in itself, miraculous. Most chapters playfully address time, which, I promise my students, is the fundamental theme in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. We are now ready for the Talmudic disputation.

“Muchos años después, frente al pelotón de fusilamiento, el coronel Aureliano Buendía había de recordar aquella tarde remota en que su padre lo llevó a conocer el hielo.” Thus begins the first chapter. In Gregory Rabassa’s English-language translation: “Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aurelia Buendía was to remember the distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.” Where is the reader positioned in that opening? What role does memory play in it? Why “había de recordar,” past perfect, and not “habría de recordar,” conditional perfect? Is Colonel Buendía truly fated to remember, or is

the remembering a choice? And what is the meaning, in Spanish, of “conocer” ‘to get acquainted with,’ vis-à-vis another form of knowledge, “saber” ‘to accumulate insight’? How does García Márquez’s sentence, among the most famous openings of a novel, compare to the first lines of *The Odyssey*, *Anna Karenina*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *The Metamorphosis*, *Pedro Páramo*, “The Circular Ruins,” *Hopscotch*, and so on? How do each of these openings work syntactically and semantically?

I proceed to ask students to rewrite the sentence in as many ways possible, reorganizing its clauses, conjugating its verbs anew, from a variety of perspectives. I bring in other interpretations of the sentence, from literary scholars, authors, and participants in past iterations of the course. Examples include Michael Wood’s “Aureliano’s Smile” and Iris M. Zavala’s “*One Hundred Years of Solitude* as Chronicle of the Indies,” both in Gene H. Bell-Villada’s casebook on the novel, or Michael Bell’s “The Cervantean Turn: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*” in Harold Bloom’s Chelsea House collection. My objective isn’t to find come up with the right answer. Instead, I look for an ahistorical dialogue, exactly as the Talmud presents the interaction between Rabbi Akiva, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Joshua, Rashi, Hillel, and other Jewish exegetes across epochs. Because of the architecture of the Talmud, these figures appear to be together at a table, discussing a moral, legal, or textual interpretation. In truth, their lives were spread across epochs, from Jerusalem during the Second Temple period, in the destruction era, to Troyes, France, in the 12th century.

The chronological sequence of events in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, I tell students, is just a mirage, since the novel is built as a spiral that embraced the concept of circular time. Time is fiction and vice versa. Writers borrow from other writers, ancient and contemporary. Likewise, interpretations of García Márquez’s novel, although framed in specific periods, might also be read extemporaneously. Critics, too, steal from other critics. What should they, the students in the classroom, appropriate from other interpretations to build their own? My interest isn’t in them mimicking Carlos Fuentes, Gene H. Bell-Villada, Michael Wood, and others, but in developing a contrasting opinion that acknowledges other interpreters without bowing to them.

As the weeks unfold, each chapter of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is analyzed autonomously and in connection with others. I playfully switch the order of the plot, sometimes mixing it to enhance hermeneutical effects. We focus on pivotal moments: the death of José Arcadio Buendía, the insomnia epidemic in Macondo, the episode about the thread of blood, the rainstorm of butterflies, the labor strike at the banana plantation as it unfolds in Macondo’s train station, the virginal ascent of Remedios the Beauty, the fate of Colonel Buendía’s seventeen children, as well as Colonel Buendía’s implausible execution. Sometimes I reread these sections aloud three, four, five times. Success at grasping their full meaning depends on repetition.

To me, students come face to face with their perplexity as they sort out the cumulative anecdotes in the novel. At a crucial juncture, I invoke Scheherazade, the protagonist of *The Arabian Nights*, to make obvious the fact that any novel, with García Márquez's as prime illustration, pays homage to her as a storyteller. In this particular case, as installments accrue, it becomes clear that to exist Macondo depends on readers, no matter where they are, returning to it. That return is similar to Scheherazade's compulsive retelling of stories to the Sultan. The Talmud stresses that to be alive, a person must narrate their life. In other words, narrative equals existence.

Grasping the wholeness of individual characters requires unflappability. The novel has a center of gravity: the odyssey of Úrsula Iguarán, the savvy, intuitive Buendía matriarch. She and her husband José Arcadio Buendía, the founders of Macondo, might be seen as yin-yang opposites. As such, they complement each other: one is outgoing and the other reserved, one sees the world as his oyster while the other zooms in on the domestic sphere in order to keep the cohesiveness of the family in motion. Such is the dichotomy between them that the couple might be a variation on Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. After reaching at least the middle point in the narrative, students are prompted to cut and paste portions about each of them, creating a parallel portrait through several pages of García Márquez's words.

Yet the hero of the story, at least in terms of novelistic real estate, is Colonel Aureliano Buendía. In practical terms, he is the hero and, even before he is born and after he dies, the narrative arch resembles a hero's journey. In the Talmud, heroes are persons capable of controlling their instinctual urges and activating their talents. But I stress that the Talmud isn't constructed as a novel: it doesn't depict a specific reality, nor does it drive toward a climax. Colonel Buendía's voyage must be seen alongside other similar ones, such as Beowulf in his fight against Grendel, Achilles in the Trojan War, and Odysseus in his audacious return to Ithaca. I equate the plights of these characters to Colonel Buendía's epic crossing.

I mention to the students that the Talmud is populated with thousands of people yet not a single one of them qualifies as a full-fledged character. This is because their purpose is to enunciate statements, as is proper in wisdom books. I ask what are the principal elements that allow a literary character to exist. Class discussion moves into the inner and outer qualities of an individual that make them unique, possessing exclusive, inalienable assets. We then examine the parallel realms, internal and external, of Petra Cotes, Gerineldo Márquez, Santa Sofía de la Piedad, Amaranta Buendía, Fernanda del Carpio, and Renata Remedios. In contrasting them, we devote our attention to understanding how each of them is described, how they speak, how they dream. Are some of these characters more developed than others? Did García Márquez create them separately in his mind and then insert aspects of them into the various chapters?

One of the emblematic dimensions of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is how, in its rise and fall, Macondo establishes a legal code that shifts as politicians come and go. I list some of the quintessential moral dictums in various Talmudic treatises, explaining their implementation at various moments in history. I subsequently encourage the students to outline Macondo's code of law, e.g., the legal system allowing neighbors to coexist without pushing the town into barbarism. Our attention centers around José Arcadio Buendía's constitutional parameters, on display in the first quarter of the novel. Should a constitution be said to come from God, I ask? Does allowing it to be a human product make its precepts less enduring?

This brings me to the question of divine intervention. García Márquez was famously atheistic, but he wasn't agnostic. A close friend of Fidel Castro, he believed Communism to be the fairest, most suitable form of government. With recurrent facetiousness, priestly figures in his works are ridiculed as naïve, misinformed, and anachronistic. Yet faith, in its spiritual connotation, plays an important role in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The same might be said of numbers. The narrative is full of numbers, used not only as expressions of aggregates but as symbolic mystery. I then relate that in the Talmud, numbers have a similar role, since in Hebrew each letter of the alphabet also has a numerical value. A text, therefore, doesn't only mean what it says, but also proposes a numerical organization of the cosmos it purports to describe.

Time, again, is the central theme in the book. It doesn't move progressively but as if in a spiral, creating cycles of departure and arrival that repeat themselves, occasionally with the same characters and habitually in successive generations, as the offspring of one individual unwittingly reenact the behavior of their ancestor. That probably is the most obvious Talmudic resonance in the narrative. The Talmud proposes that, while each of us possess free will, we are fated to replicate, unconsciously and otherwise, the conduct of our predecessors and successors. Human acts, in fact, are always the same; only circumstantial details change.

Students look at Mircea Eliade's myth of "the eternal return" as a leitmotif, especially in the part, in the fourteenth chapter, where the reader is told that Amaranta Úrsula, visited by a premonition of her own death, begins sewing her own funeral shroud. The overall philosophy in Macondo is that things are created to be destroyed and destroyed to be created. After this, I bring students to reflect on the parameters of time across cultures as we talk about the Indigenous components of the novel, including the character of Remedios Moscote, who eats earth and lives in a world with its own timing, and expound on Isaac Newton's *Philosophical Writings*, Kant's *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Bergson's *Time and Free Will*, and Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths."

Aside from time, and even along with it, is the other central theme: love. It is seen in the book as a disease and its cure. People fall in and out of love at a rapid

pace and what they do with that love is, in the end, a way to express who they are. The Talmud, in comparison, is somewhat mute on the topic of love. Or else, it focuses not on love as madness but love as the underpinning of a moral existence. That is, it concentrates on love as defined in Leviticus 19:18b: in the King James Version, “Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD.” An exegesis from *Yevamot* 62b:19:

The Sages taught: One who loves his wife as he loves himself, and who honors her more than himself, and who instructs his sons and daughters in an upright path, and who marries them off near the time when they reach maturity, about him the verse states: And you shall know that your tent is in peace. As a result of his actions, there will be peace in his home, as it will be devoid of quarrel and sin.

Needless to say, the cast of the novel is often caught in “sinful” acts, so much so that the engine that pushes the story forward is incest. I encourage students to contrast the two texts, which leads me to inquire if, in their opinion, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is, for all intents and purposes, a manual of love: romantic love, carnal love, family love, love of country, love of nature, love of God, and, most crucially, love of self.

Although I have no doubt about it, I want them to prove it. Their task is to show how distinct is the love José Arcadio Buendía gives to each of his three children, how Colonel Aureliano Buendía’s manly love differs from that of Aureliano Segundo, Pietro Crespi, Mauricio Babilonia, and the last of the Aurelianos, and how Úrsula Iguarán loves in a unique way that distinguishes her from Rebeca, Pilar Ternera, Remedios Moscote, and Fernanda del Carpio. Does García Márquez, as the author, love all his characters the same way? And which of the characters do individual students love the most?

Once the topic of love is addressed, I ask students to debate the concept of solitude. Semantically, what is the difference between solitude and loneliness? Spanish doesn’t separate the two; both are *soledad*. Are solitude and loneliness experienced differently across cultures? Should Gregory Rabassa’s translation into English have been titled *One Hundred Years of Loneliness*? I take this opportunity to consider the “tension” between García Márquez’s original and Rabassa’s translation. I mention that in the Second Part of *Don Quixote of La Mancha*, Don Quixote, in a conversation with his squire in Barcelona at a print shop, tells him that to read a work in translation is like looking at a Flemish carpet from the back. A number of the students in the course, though not all, are bilingual. Obviously reading the Macondo novel *en español* allows one to grasp its colors fully, and not as if they were on the back of a Flemish tapestry. Yet are there benefits in reading

a work in translation rather than the original? I tell the class that I have read it numerous times in both languages (as well as in others), and, frankly—and controversially—I no longer see much difference. There are indeed a few mistakes in the translation. But there are also mistakes in the original, some of which the translation quietly resolves.

Years ago, during a BBC interview, I described García Márquez's novel as a Mexican telenovela: fragmentary in cadence, baroque in its delivery, and prone to melodrama. I quickly became the target of furious attacks on traditional and social media. I stand by my statement. Although García Márquez wasn't into TV but into cinema, as a spectator and as a screenwriter, when the novel was being crafted in the mid-1960s, the sensibility of telenovelas was already ubiquitous. Emotions are always on full throttle in Macondo, and most characters seem incapable of taming them. The only ingredient missing is background music.

To explore this interpretative bent, students are charged with turning particular dialogues into telenovela scenes, with sharp, surprising outcomes. It doesn't take a professional to turn the plot into a Netflix serial. (By the way, to the degree possible, participants are discouraged from watching the actual Netflix adaptation, if for no other reason than García Márquez's own prohibition against adapting his novel for the small or large screen, regardless of the offers he received from Anthony Quinn, Francis Ford Coppola, and others. It was his children, after his death, who capitalized—blindly and nefariously—on the opportunity.

Arguably the most atemporal creation in the novel—and perhaps the most archetypal Jewish character, in his diasporic dimension—is Melquíades, the enigmatic gypsy who, as the novel nears its conclusion, is revealed to have surprising control over the narrative. His presence, in the last third, provokes a series of metaliterary effects, including the insertion of the author himself and his family into the plot, along with references to *Hopscotch*, Carpentier's *The Lost Steps*, and Fuentes's *Where the Air is Clear*. The Talmud, too, plays with mirrors, inviting readers to meditate on para-literary devices. Moreover, as in every book—given its human nature—there are a handful of either outright or purposeful errors—call them slips—and unfinished storylines in García Márquez's novel. In the spirit of hermeneutical disquisition, students who by the end of the course explain these satisfactorily receive an automatic A grade.

In teaching the advanced seminar more than a dozen times, I am struck by how each vicissitude leaves me with a sense of reverence: for *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as an astonishing work of art, for my students' young, sponge-like minds, and for the Talmud as a prism through which to elucidate the world. I repeatedly reach the conclusion, more so in later years than before, that the great works of literature teach us how to experience life in full.

By the end of our Talmudic reading, all of us feel we understand the novel intrinsically, meaning we know its secrets. I used to believe that repetition in

teaching amounted to a sign of exhaustion. I am now convinced that repetition, reading the same book over and over again with a new crop of students, is a key to squeezing meaning to its fullest. I also used to think that agreement of opinions in the classroom is a sign of democratic harmony. But I've learned over many years that democracies are anything but harmonious. Indeed, they thrive on disagreement. It is the function of the classroom to encourage students to build their own dissenting viewpoints, always based on a broad understanding of history and the sources that define a text.

Finally, I must underscore the fact that for me, the classroom isn't a contentious place. Students are always asked to be respectful. In *The Age of Louis XIV*, Voltaire argued that "It is dangerous to be right in matters on which the established authorities are wrong." Although the Talmud might look like an atemporal tool in regards to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it is in fact the perfect resource to encourage close reading. In a room where everyone thinks the same way, a contrarian approach feels defiant. Nothing is more inspiring to me.

At the beginning of the semester, as I open the novel again, I get the jolt of exhilaration I first felt in Mexico City when I was twenty years old. I have aged and so has *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Our friendship is one of my biggest joys in life.

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