DOCTOR ABRENUNCIO

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In my fifty years of reading fiction I have come across only a handful of perfect novels, among which are *1984* (Orwell)*, Light in August* (Faulkner), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee)*, The Quiet American* (Greene)*,* and *Of Love and Other Demons* (Marquez). You are sure to know all but the latter. Having read all of Gabriel Garcia Marquez' work (in translation), and joining the chorus which regards him as the greatest living writer, I am startled when this short novel of his is relatively unknown. What makes a perfect novel? Story, characters, style, guts, head, humor, wisdom, shape—and, of course, the novel has to be about something that *matters.* You will note that *1984* (fascism), *Light* and *Mockingbird* (race) and *Quiet* (the insanity of empire) matter as much as any fiction matters. I am hard put to name a novel I would call perfect if it is about a divorce (a subject which I have sworn never to write about). *Of Love and Other Demons* (a title of genius) has all of these qualities.

Set in a South American seaport in the colonial era, a time of viceroys and bishops, enlightened men and Inquisitors, saints and slaves and lepers and pirates, it is the story of Sierva Maria, the only child of a decaying noble family, who has been raised in the

slaves' courtyard of her father's cobwebbed mansion while her mother succumbs to fermented honey and cacao on a faraway plantation. On her 12th birthday the girl is bitten by a rabid dog, and even as the wound is healing she is made to endure therapies indistinguishable from tortures. Believed, finally, to be possessed, she is brought to a convent for observation. Into her cell stumbles Father Cayetano Delaura, the Bishop's protégé and academic librarian, who has already dreamed about a girl with bright red hair trailing after her like a bridal train. He meets her and is moved by this kicking, spitting emaciated creature strapped to a stone bed in the prison part of the convent. As he tends to her with holy water and sacramental oils, breathing gently on her chafed skin where she was bitten to cool it, feeding her beautiful smuggled pastries, Delaura feels "something immense and irreparable" happening to him. It is love, "the most terrible demon of all." And it is not long before Sierva Maria, though dreaming of snow, joins him in his fevered misery.

All the characters are remarkable, and one of them is a doctor. Imagine writing, nowadays, about a doctor in the colonial period in a decaying port on the Caribbean coast of Columbia? Here is Marquez:

"The licenciate Abrenuncio de Sa Periera Cao was the most notable and controversial physician in the city. Dressed identically to the king of clubs, he wore a broad-brimmed hat for the sun, riding boots, and the black cloak favored by educated libertines….Because of his puerile corpulence the coachman had to help the doctor into the Marquis' carriage…He had been an outstanding student of the physician Juan

Mendez Nieto, another Portuguese Jew who had emigrated to the Caribbean because of the persecution in Spain, and had inherited his evil reputation for necromancy and a loose tongue, but no one cast doubt on his learning. His disputes with other physicians, who would not forgive his incredible successes or uncommon methods, were constant and bloody. He had invented a pill to be taken once a year which enhanced one's health and lengthened one's life but caused such mental derangement for the first three days that no one but the doctor had dared to swallow it. At one time he had been in the habit of playing the harp at the bedside of his patients in order to sedate them with certain music composed for the purpose. He did not practice surgery, which he always considered an inferior art fit only for charlatans and barbers, and his terrifying specialty was predicting the day and hour his patients would die. Both his good name and his bad, however, were based on the same circumstance: it was said, and no one ever disproved it, that he had resurrected a dead man."

At several points in the novel, the doctor intervenes in the battle between the Marquis, father of the bitten Sierva, and the priest. Along the way he offers what still stands as sage medical advice—but since there are few medicines of proven use in his 16th century canon, his treatments are in fact timeless--his healing presence and his cynical/idealistic wisdom about life.

The Marquis visits the doctor to consult about Sierva. Abrenuncio has an office piled with treatises and treatments, and "walked the narrow paper canyons with the ease of a rhinoceros among the roses. "Books are worthless," the doctor says. "Life has helped me

cure the diseases that other doctors cause with their medicines." (A personal note: how can I, the author of *The House of God* and *Mount Misery*, not see, in this doctor, The Fat Man? How like these words are to Law Number 13: "The delivery of medical care is to do as much nothing as possible.") Abrenuncio examines Sierva--"Doctors see with their hands" he reassures the frightened girl—and afterwards, speaking to the Marquis, tells him that the girl, despite denying it, knows that the dog that bit her was rabid. When the Marquis asks how he knew, since the girl had not told him, the doctor says, "She did not tell me, Senor. Her heart did: It was like a little caged frog." Since the girl had lied about everything, the Marquis says, "Perhaps she will be a poet," to which the doctor says, "The more transparent the writing, the more visible the poetry."

This is a key to this marvelous character (and to the novel itself, for the author, through the doctor, is talking about his own view of fiction). Among those who live embracing and in the embrace of illusion—whether of nobility, greed, religion (or fiction)—Abrenuncio is a truth-teller, seeing things as they are. For that, he is condemned by the Catholic Church—he once was tried by the Holy See for raising the dead man, and acquitted only when the man later confessed that he never lost consciousness. The doctor tells the Marquis that no one has ever survived hydrophobia (rabies). When the father asks what he can do for his daughter, the doctor gives the most amazing medical advice—which, of course, is not medical or amazing at all, but spiritual, for he realizes that all of "medicine" is a but slim volume in the library of "Life." The advice?

"Play music for her, fill the house with flowers, have the birds sing, take her to the ocean to see the sunsets, give her everything that can make her happy. No medicine cures what happiness cannot."

He gives, then, a prescription of happiness. In the centuries since then, while we have discovered certain technological treatments for our various diagnoses, have even, perhaps let technology make technicians of us, how hard it has gotten for us doctors to live our lives in a way that we can offer, from the heart and in a way that it will be taken in by our patients, that essential, healing advice. Happiness, after all, has been shown in many studies to positively affect the immune system; the clumsy delivery of bad medical news has been shown to depress the immune system and increase morbidity and mortality.

The intervention of Abrenuncio comes to the attention of the Bishop. According to this "holy man," the doctor leads a "life without God". In fact, once again the Church has gotten it backwards, for the doctor, in his practice of spirituality, is nearer any divinity than the puffed-up Bishop and sickly, repressed priest. The Bishop decrees that the girl be investigated for possession by demons, and then exorcised.

Now *that* is a terrific treatment, is it not? As terrific as, in our day, Freud and psychoanalysis, no? How much better off we'd all be if, tomorrow, we could bury both of these inhumane dogmas.

As the Bishop puts it to the Marquis: "No matter what the physicians may claim, rabies in humans is often one of the many snares of the Enemy. One of the demon's numerous deceptions is to take on the appearance of a foul disease in order to enter an innocent body. And once inside, no human power is capable of making him leave…Although your daughter's body may be lost forever, God has provided us with the means to save her soul…Put her in our hands. God will do the rest."

The Marquis agrees, and locks up his daughter in the Convent of Santa Clara, where the Clarissan nuns immediately ascertain that she is possessed by the Devil. When the Marquis tells the doctor about this, Abrenuncio is amused and horrified. "There is not much difference between that and the witchcraft of the blacks. In fact, it is even worse, because the blacks only sacrifice roosters to their gods, while the Holy Office is happy to break innocents on the rack or burn them alive in a public spectacle….I think that killing her would have been more Christian than burying her alive. Take her out of there." When the Marquis says that he wants to do this, but feels that he doesn't have the strength to oppose the will of God, the doctor says, "Well, start to feel as if you did. Perhaps God will thank you someday."

Abrenuncio has an ability to stand in a wider space, a space informed by, as a doctor, his *having been with suffering and the awareness that it can brin*g (as opposed to the isolated-from-the-living-and-protected-from-life Bishop locked up in his decaying palace, speaking only to his church servants and confiding only in his cowering acolyte Delaura). This real-life experience of "being with suffering" (which is, after all, and literally,

"compassion") allows Abrenuncio to see and understand more deeply, and, in the face of this folly of religion, hold a firm, compassionate view—a lesson for us doctors today.

Eventually the doctor is called upon by Delaura, the priest who has been assigned to exorcise Sierva and who has fallen in love with her. Delaura is wearing a patch over one eye because he gazed directly at a lunar eclipse. The doctor removes the patch and says, "The only thing wrong with that eye is that it sees more than it ought to" and gives him a clear liquid to apply (later, when it does cure the eye, he tells his patient, "I gave you the best treatment we know for solar blindness: drops of rainwater.") The priest admires the doctor's extensive library, and the doctor finds him a forbidden volume for which he'd been searching ever since his own copy had been confiscated from him in seminary in Seville when he was twelve. Abrenuncio informs Delaura about the history of rabies, and about how it had always been confused with demonic possession, madness, or "other disturbances of the spirit." He says that after many weeks, Sierva Maria had yet to contract the disease, and so it seems that she will fully recover. The only risk, he concludes, was that she would die of the cruelty of exorcism. Delaura says that he does not believe the rumors of the girl's demonic abilities that the nuns had observed, but that if he said so, he and the doctor would be the only ones "against everybody else." To which the doctor says, "I am no more than hunted prey in the game preserve of the Holy Office." He then looks into the priest's eyes, "into the depths of his soul," and realizes that the young man is on the verge of tears. "Do not torture yourself in vain," Abrenuncio said in a soothing tone. "Perhaps you have come here only because you

needed to talk about her." The priest "felt naked" and rushed to leave, "and the doctor saw that he seemed trapped in mortal sorrow."

Once again, here is an example of what all good doctors do: listen, respond with compassion, so that the patient "feels seen"—in fact both doctor and patient "feel seen" by each other—there is the "click" of connection, or mutual empathy, and healing.

Later, when the priest says, "I would like to know why you are so kind to me," the doctor responds, "Because we atheists cannot live without clerics. Our patients entrust their bodies to us, but not their souls, and like the devil, we try to win them away from God." The priest: "That does not go along with your beliefs." The doctor: "Not even I know what those are."

In Abrenuncio's last appearance in the novel, when the priest, his love for Sierva discovered, has been relegated to tending lepers at the Amor Dios Hospital, the doctor visits him, and asks, "Aren't you afraid you will now be damned?" The priest: "I believe I already am, but not by the Holy Spirit. I have always believed He attributes more importance to love than to faith." The doctor: "You people have a religion of death that fills you with the joy and courage to confront it. I do not: I believe the only essential thing is to be alive."

He does not add, “and to be alive with others.” He doesn’t have to. Half a millennium later—and also from 1995 when Marquez brought him to light—the doctor is alive with us, and will be for as long as there are still books.

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