

## One Hundred Years of Solitude: The Finale

Rita A. Bergenholtz, University of South Florida

The almost universal popularity of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* may be explained in part by the fact that it is, among many other things, "one of the funniest books ever written."<sup>1</sup> While critics have analyzed a number of the strategies that contribute to *Solitude's* often "dark" comedy—arguing that much of the humor is at the expense of the reader whose expectations concerning the plot, the tone, and the limits of reality are repeatedly undermined<sup>2</sup>—no one, to my knowledge, has adequately explored how García Márquez's rhetorical strategy of reducing metaphors to their literal meanings contributes to the absurd humor of the novel's "breath-taking" finale.

The literalization of words and clichés—what Frank Palmeri refers to as "material leveling"<sup>3</sup>—is a pervasive source of ironic humor throughout *Solitude*. For example, in order to emphasize the absurd solitude of power, the legendary Colonel Aureliano Buendía literally has his aides draw a "chalk circle" around him "whenever he stop[s]," a circle "which only he [can] enter."<sup>4</sup> Exaggerating the tenacious power of family ties, "a trickle of blood" from José Arcadio's right ear embarks on a fabulous journey so that it may literally return to its origin in Ursula (129). Parodying the story of Moses, the bastard son of Mauricio Babilonia and Renata Remedios Buendía, Aureliano Babilonia, is literally delivered to Fernanda's doorstep by a nun "bearing a small basket on her arm" (227). Satirizing the power of romantic love, several men actually die because of their love for Remedios the Beauty, prompting Ursula to wish for a miracle, which occurs when Remedios rises towards heaven "in the midst of the flapping sheets" (223). Undermining the dignity of old age, Ursula becomes an "amusing plaything" for Amaranta Ursula and little Aureliano (302). Finally, mocking the unpredictability of Death, both Ursula and Amaranta literally die on cue—the former when the rains stop and the latter when she completes her own shroud.

This strategy of reducing the metaphoric to the literal is nowhere more apparent, and nowhere more unsettling, than in the novel's tragicomic finale, which is also a masterful parody of closure: the end of the novel is also the end of Aureliano Babilonia's life, the end of the Buendía line, the end of Macondo, and, coincidentally, the end of the century. By extension, it is also our collective end. How-

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<sup>1</sup> Gene H. Bell-Villada, *García Márquez: The Man and His Work* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990) 116.

<sup>2</sup> Clive Griffin, "The Humour of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*," in *Gabriel García Márquez: New Readings*, eds. Bernard McGuirk and Richard Cardwell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 89. See also, Paul Dixon, "Joke Formulas in *Cien Años de Soledad*," *Chasqui* 15 (1986): 18-22.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Palmeri, *Satire in Narrative* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990) 10-18.

<sup>4</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Avon Books, 1971) 159. Trans. of *Cien Años de Soledad* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, S.A., 1967). All references are to this edition.

ever, if, as Frank Kermode argues in *The Sense of an Ending*, we do not merely "hunger for ends and crises,"<sup>5</sup> but for "intelligible Ends,"<sup>6</sup> then the overdetermined conclusion to *Solitude* might more accurately be described as the "non-sense" of an ending. What, for example, are we to make of the fact that Ursula's superstitious predictions are realized, and the terminal Aureliano is born with "the tail of a pig" (379), and later eaten by ants, thus fulfilling—again, literally—the bizarre epigraph to Melquíades's parchments: "The first of the line is tied to a tree and the last is being eaten by the ants" (381). And what are we to make of the "revelation" that Melquíades is the narrator? And that his parchments are, somehow or other, a literal account of "the history of the [Buendía] family" (381)—not including a prophesy of what will be, as we might expect, but merely a record of what has already been, of "everything" that is already "known." Furthermore, what are we supposed to think about Melquíades's secret code when it is "revealed" to us in all of its absurdly complex splendor: "He had written it in Sanskrit, which was his mother tongue, and he had encoded the even lines in the private cipher of the Emperor Augustus and the odd ones in a Lacedemonian military code. The final protection . . . was based on the fact that Melquíades had not put events in the order of man's conventional time, but had concentrated a century of daily episodes in such a way that they coexisted in one instant" (382). And what, finally, are we to make of the fact that all of this—the parchments, the characters, and even Macondo—is swept away by a "biblical hurricane"?

From a standard moralistic point of view, the "biblical hurricane" clearly signifies the terrible wrath of the gods (although surely the child with a pig's tail is punishment enough for incest). Critics have also sensed the storm's importance and have assigned it a variety of literary significancies. For example, this big wind has been transformed into "a metaphor [for] time,"<sup>7</sup> a symbol of past "nostalgia,"<sup>8</sup> a figure for interpretation,<sup>9</sup> and a "literary wind," which alludes to "*Strong Wind*," a novel by the Guatemalan writer Miguel Angel Asturias,<sup>10</sup> or perhaps to "Alejo Carpentier's 'green wind' in *The Kingdom of This World*."<sup>11</sup> In sharp contrast, I would downgrade this "prophetic" whirlwind, stressing the fact that it is the last grand literalization. It is merely a literal wind which annihilates Macondo. It is not a wind that has supernatural origins or symbolic implications, but rather an unexpectedly ordinary wind that has silently and unobtrusively been present from the novel's beginning and that gathers strength when the parchments, "down to the most trivial details" (382), are literally fulfilled; that is, when "a century of daily episodes" literally exists simultaneously.

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<sup>5</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968) 55.

<sup>6</sup> Kermode 8.

<sup>7</sup> Emir Rodríguez Monegal, "One Hundred Years of Solitude: The Last Three Pages," *Books Abroad* 47.3 (1973): 485-89. Rpt. in *Critical Essays on Gabriel García Márquez*, ed. George R. McMurray (Boston: GK. Hall, 1987) 148.

<sup>8</sup> Edwin Williamson, "Magical Realism and the Theme of Incest in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*," in *Gabriel García Márquez: New Readings* 58.

<sup>9</sup> Anibal González, "Translation and the Novel: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*," in *Modern Critical Views: Gabriel García Márquez*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1989) 281.

<sup>10</sup> Griffin 93.

<sup>11</sup> Jose David Saldivar, "Ideology and Deconstruction in Macondo," *Latin American Literary Review* 13.25 (1985): 34.

On the first page of *Solitude*, Melquíades explains to José Arcadio Buendía that the "magical irons" (magnets) operate because "things have a life of their own . . . It's simply a matter of waking up their souls" (11). Throughout the novel, the narrator does, in fact, give "things" as well as people "souls." Like the God of Genesis who "formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life," the narrator animates his creations by literally giving each of them a distinctive breath, thus reducing the spiritual (soul/animas) to the physical (breath/air/wind), just as the metaphorical is reduced, again and again, to the literal. Following this premise, it should not surprise us that when the "giant" opens the chest containing ice, it gives off "a glacial exhalation" (25), just as the "old chests where they [keep] their clothes [exhale] the warm smell of basil" (18). Even the yellow train that surprises Macondo is characterized by "a loud, panting respiration" (210), and a "great volcanic belch" (216). Also, when Aureliano Babilonia crosses the porch on what will be the last day of the novel, he hears "the morning sighs of oregano" (380), and after Colonel Aureliano Buendía falls in love with Remedios, even "the soft breath of the roses" reminds him of her (69).

More obvious and more numerous, however, are the characters' exhalations. José Arcadio Buendía "exhal[es] a deep sigh of resignation" (23) and Melquíades "exhale[s] the odor of a sleeping animal" (75). The young José Arcadio listens to "his brother's calm breathing, the dry cough of his father in the next room, [and] the asthma of the hens" (33-34); many years later, when José Arcadio returns to Macondo, his "volcanic breathing [can] be heard all over the house" (94). Long before Aureliano becomes the Colonel, he encounters an "adolescent mulatto girl" (Eréndira) whose "breathing [is] forced because of an immeasurable exhaustion" (57-58). Pietro Crespi is always preceded "by a cool breath of lavender" (77), while the gypsy girl "exhale[s] a lugubrious lament and a vague smell of mud" (40). Dr. Noguera is "a kind of dusty iguana whose lungs whistl[e] when he breathe[s]" (100). Aureliano José derives an illicit pleasure from the "feel" of "Amaranta's warm breathing at dawn" (139), while generations later José Arcadio, just returned from Rome, paces about the decaying house, "breathing like a cat and thinking about Amaranta" (339). Fernanda can "scarcely breathe" when she enters Meme's bedroom crowded with yellow butterflies (271). Remedios Moscote brings "a breath of merriment to the house" (89), and Remedios the Beauty seems to contribute to "the new breath of vitality" (190) that shakes up the Buendía homestead after twenty years of war, yet she actually emits "a breath of perturbation, a tormenting breeze" (218), not "a breath of love but a fatal emanation" (220). The Pope is characterized by his "hidden breath of cologne" (341) and the French matrons bring with them "the breath of renovation" (186). Three months after Amaranta Ursula returns to the ancestral home, its occupants are able to "[breath] once more the atmosphere of youth and festivity that had existed during the days of the pianaola" (347), and the crowd at the carnival gives off "the mingled breath of manure and sandals" (25), while the crowd at the banana company massacre releases "a seismic voice, a volcanic breath, the roar of a cataclysm" (283).

When we first read *Solitude*, these various breaths—which naturally accompany every aspect of life from speaking to eating to sleeping to making love—barely attract our attention. However, while these distinctive little breaths, these little puffs of hot air, may seem to be gratuitous details, collectively they prove to be quite potent. One hundred years of hot air, compressed into one climactic in-

stant, is no laughing matter. Or is it? Indeed, as Aureliano approaches this final and fatal moment, all of the ostensibly harmless and ordinary breaths do begin to convene and to gather strength: "At that point, impatient to know his origin, Aureliano skipped ahead. Then the wind began, warm, incipient, full of voices from the past, the murmurs of ancient geraniums, sighs of disenchantment that preceded the most tenacious nostalgia" (382). But Aureliano, not unlike the reader, is so engrossed by the revelations about his past that he fails to notice the wind. Several lines later, the wind intensifies. Again, Aureliano is "so absorbed" that he does not "feel the second surge of wind" (382). We, of course, should not be surprised that the wind, now grown to "cyclonic strength," is able to tear "doors and windows off their hinges" and pull off "the roof of the east wing" and even uproot "the foundations" of the house (382). After all, the narrator informed us just six pages earlier that the Buendía's ancestral home needed only "one last breath to be knocked down" (376). Apparently, a solitary blast from the past would be sufficient to cause the house to collapse. Imagine, then, the destruction that will result when all of the Buendía voices/breaths from the last one hundred years or more relinquish their solitude and join together for one brief moment, one absurd family reunion. Ironically, as the novel "winds down" to this monumental anticlimax, the pace of narration increases, so that in less time than it takes to explain how the first of the line is related to the last of the line, the cyclone swells until Macondo becomes "a fearful whirlwind of dust and rubble being spun about by the wrath of the biblical hurricane" (383). As the wind reaches this hyperbolic pitch, Aureliano (along with the reader) learns that not only will the house of Buendía be leveled, but also that Macondo, "the city of mirrors (or mirages) [will] be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men at the precise moment when Aureliano Babilonia would finish deciphering the parchments, and that everything written on them was unrepeatabe since time immemorial and forever more" (383).

Fortunately for us, the parchments—that is, this novel—are not literally "exiled from the memory of men"; they are not literally "unrepeatabe." We can read and reread them as often as we like. In fact, we can even read them aloud, along with Aureliano Babilonia. Moreover, if each of us were to do so—to add our own breath of spearmint or tobacco or garlic or bourbon or whatever to the already egregious conglomeration of breaths that includes everything from lavender to manure—we would begin to recognize just how amusing the finale really is. But the first time that we encounter this carefully engineered conclusion, we are too overwhelmed, too astonished to laugh. In effect, we are in a position similar to the one José Arcadio is in when he looks at the "enormous, transparent block with infinite internal needles" and murmurs, "It's the largest diamond in the world" (25-26). With a "brick face" the gypsy informs him that it is merely ice. With a similar "brick face"—which, according to the author, he inherited from his grandmother<sup>12</sup>—García Márquez presents the conclusion to this long-winded novel which Robert Coover claims is "from genesis to apocalypse a cocky pipe-blowing

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<sup>12</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, "Gabriel García Márquez: The Art of Fiction." Interview. *Paris Review* (Winter 1982): 56.

and drum-thumping magical gypsy show."<sup>13</sup> That is, while the "serious" reader labors mightily to interpret the significance of the "biblical hurricane," the author sits back and smiles, enjoying his tempest in a teacup and whispering—in a voice which reminds us of the wise Catalonian whose "fervor for the written word was an interweaving of solemn respect and gossipy irreverence" (368)—"It's just a lot of hot air."

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Coover, "The Master's Voice," *American Review* 26 (1977): 363.