# RICOEUR'S THEORY OF NARRATIVE TIME AND ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE

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## ABSTRACT

*Paul Ricoeur´s narrative theory of time proposes that we, during our reading, move backwards and forward in narrative time and that "temporality springs forth in the plural unity of future, past and present" (167). In utilizing his theory of time and the idea of cyclical time as a prominent characteristic in twentieth century literature, I attempt to apply his intriguing theory to an exemplary novel, One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967) by the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez. The essay demonstrates how the circularity of the imaginary travel and the linearity of the quest as such are thus put together. Indeed, time is circular and recurrent rather than rectilinear and progressive in this novel wherein readers are moved between present, past and future time.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In about the middle of 1967, the novel One Hundred Years of Solitude was published in Buenos Aires, provoking a literary earthquake throughout Latin America. The critics recognized the book as a masterpiece of the art of fiction and the public endorsed this opinion, systematically exhausting new editions, which, at one point, appeared at the astounding rate of one a week. Overnight, García Márquez became almost as famous as a great soccer player or an eminent singer of boleros (Vargas Llosa, 1971:129).

These remarks by Mario Vargas Llosa, Peru's best writer of contemporary prose fiction, describe the initial impact Garcia Márquez's greatest work had on the Latin American reading public. However, García Márquez's success does not stop here; it goes beyond boundaries, reaching

readers outside the Spanish-speaking world. Translations began to appear and the novel received different awards such as the Chianchiano Prize in Italy in 1969, the French named it the best book of the year in 1969 too, and American critics chose it as one of the best books of the year in 1979. (Williams, 1984:1). In fact, Gabriel García Márquez is among the most celebrated Latin American writers, especially since receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982.

I attempt in this essay to apply Paul Ricouer's theory of "Narrative Time" to some of the major theoretical points of García Márquez's novel One Hundred Years of Solitude. This novel shows abundant zigzags in time, confusing the reader with both flashbacks of past matters and long leaps toward future events. This plotting gives us access to that reciprocity between narrativity and temporality that Ricoeur alludes to in his theory of time as "escaping that dichotomy between the chronology of sequence and the a-chronology of models" (Ricoeur, 1980:165). Paul Ricoeur has exercised an enormous influence on literary studies and theory. He is a professor of philosophy at the Universite de Paris, and his works

have gained importance for critics and scholars in North America as well as in Latin America.

## Plural unity in ricoeur`s theory of time

To demonstrate how we readers are moved back and forth between a theory of narrative and theory of time, I will start with the last pages of the novel because they are extremely important to its overall meaning. It is at the end that we discover Melquíades as a character-narrator transcribing the history of the Buendía family on his parchments. When someone starts telling a story, every single event is already spread out in narrative time. Therefore, we find ourselves reading a story that was already written and organized by Melquíades with one hundred years of anticipation. Thus, our narrator can be located in a present time or in the future to tell us the past. The novel begins:

> 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 (García Márquez, 1967:9).

[Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano

Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice (1)].

Using this opening statement, we can say that the narrator, Melquíades, is in a time in which events seem as if they have happened a long time ago. Because of this perspective, he knows not only the past he is narrating, but also the future of the past, "Many years later…" This temporal position lets the narrator have permanent control over the non-chronological sequence of a fictitious reality, while at the same time, relating the events to a remote past.

Almost every event responds to this circular temporal construction in which we move back and forth in narrative time; the narrative goes from future time to a remote past and then back to its beginning. As Jerry Root points out, " We seem to enter the novel through the back door, as if we already knew about Colonel Aureliano Buendía and his final moments before the firing squad" (Root, 1988:1). The opening sentence begins and ends at the same place. The linear syntax of the story carries us from the foundation of Macondo to its destruction, just as the spiral of

time takes us circularly through the occurrences. The entire past, therefore,

already belongs to the future where the Colonel, remembering, waits for us as he faces the firing squad. Meanwhile, we advance in our reading and catch up with him in the present to free him from death.

Definitely, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* offers a temporal structure that can be compared to a huge cycle in which the term "within-time-ness" shows this shift back and forth between past, present and future. Ricoeur´s analysis of temporal structure of "within-time-ness" is defined by our "throwness among things," so that temporality becomes dependent on the description of aspects of our concern or "preoccupation" (Ricoeur, 1980:168). Melquíades' death serves as an illustration of this level. The event starts by mentioning the main fact, "The newfound harmony was interrupted by the death of Melquíades" (García Márquez, 1967:72). Then, we are moved to a remote past of that event in which most of Melquíades' life is narrated. We are informed of his activities, his stay in the room that Ursula built for him, and finally

his death when we read, "They buried him in a grave dug in the center of the plot… they wrote the only thing they knew about him: MELAQUÍADES" (García Márquez, 1967:75).

Melquíades' death is also a significant event because it shows how his resurrection is a mythical act. This is at least his second death, and only by the use of myth can García Márquez bring his characters back to life; as it happens in chapter three during the episode of the insomnia plague when Melquíades reappears in the novel bringing the cure to the loss of memory.

Another example of this disconcerting time framework in which the reader is thrown in time with no preparation whatsoever, is the dance for the inauguration of the Buendía's house. Again, it all starts with the mentioning of the essential fact by means of a leap toward the future, "The new house, white like a dove, was inaugurated with a dance" (García Márquez, 1967:61). Immediately after, the narration shifts to the origin of that episode: "Ursula had got that idea from the afternoon when she saw…," and after this, we read all the events that will contribute to the inauguration

such as the dance classes that Pietro Crespi gives to Amaranta and Rebeca, the pianola incident, and the desperate attempts to fix it. And finally, back to the main incident that served as point of departure: "the celebration of the dance" (García Márquez, 1967:63).

These two examples are good representations of the "within-time-ness" level -which is not linear- that shows how narrative time in García Márquez's novel is circular. Ricoeur's suspicion that both, anti-narrativist epistemologists and structuralist literary critics have not given much concern toward the properly temporal aspects of narrative in the novel is clear. As he says, "The theory of history and theory of fictional narratives seem to take for granted that whenever there is a time, it is always a time laid out chronologically, a linear time, defined by a succession of instants" (Ricoeur, 1980:167). Thus, the principle function of circularity in the novel consists, "in creating the illusion of atemporality in the conscience of the reader and in melting history into an eternal present" (Toro, 1984: 974). Circular time, therefore, allows Macondo to exist as a place without beginning or ending, and it transforms the myth of Macondo into a circular series of events which can appear

or disappear at different intervals (Sims, 1980: 147). García Márquez, then, is a mythmaker mostly in the sense that his world is opposed to linear and conventional time.

## Linear reality vs circular imagination

Ricoeur also deals with a basic characteristic of plot by moving from narrative theory back to theory of time. He considers that every narrative combines two dimensions, one chronological (linear) and another non-chronological (Ricoeur, 1980:174). It is interesting to notice how this statement relates well to One Hundred years of Solitude , which presents the destruction of chronology. García Márquez has stated that as soon as he freed himself from the notion of strict chronology, his most difficult problems were solved. He could not finish the novel for more than twenty years because the appropriate treatment of time always eluded him (McMurray, 1985:74). Thus, George McMurray points out, in García Márquez's masterpiece, " the lineal history of Macondos's foundation, development, economic boom, decline, and destruction is imbued with a mytho-poetic atmosphere of cyclical recurrences and archetypal patterns that modify temporal progression and provide a background of greater thematic and stylistic richness" (McMurray, 1985:57).

Ricoeur´s idea of plot leads us to believe that the function of some narratives is "to establish human actions at the level of authentic historicality, that is, of repetition" (Ricoeur, 1980:180). The circular structure of the novel is compatible with the plot, which moves forward in linear development, never going back, yet searching constantly for its origins. The novel contains no index and its chapters have no titles; it is a chain of repetition and continuity itself. Names and events are often repeated in the history of the Buendía family and there is always a new beginning, a returning -I would almost say a reincarnation- of the characters, whose overwhelming personalities reappear continuously in accordance with the design-destiny of their names. As an illustration of this repetition of personalities and activities serves the last dinner the whole family had together, before Colonel Aureliano Buendía leaves for War following his father's steps. The narrator tells us:

That night, at dinner, the supposed Aureliano Segundo broke his bread with his right hand and drank his soup with his left. His twin brother, the supposed José Arcadio Segundo, broke his bread with his left hand and drank his soup with his right. So precise was their coordination that they did not look like two brothers sitting opposite each other but like a trick with mirrors (García Márquez, 1967:177).

This narrative of repetition demonstrates how we read time backwards by reading the end into the beginning and the beginning into the end. For Ricoeur, memory is a very important aspect because it helps to recover other events by repetition. Memory recollects events stretching time story from beginning to end (Ricoeur, 1980: 179). As a result, this cyclical time offers a temporary escape from the harsh realities of history by giving the impression of an eternal present, constantly imparting new life by patterns of repetition that help to expand time between a beginning and an ending. The most obvious case in point is the repetition of names and traits within the Buendía family; for example, the José Arcadios emerging as strong and impulsive,

while the Aurelianos as lucid and withdrawn. This repetitive pattern is also reinforced by the numerous incidents bordering on incest; the most evident involving José Arcadio Buendía and Ursula Iguaran; Colonel Aureliano Buendía and Pilar Ternera; Pilar Ternera and her son Arcadio, and finally, Amaranta Ursula and her nephew Aureliano (Babilonia) bringing the line to an end.

Time, for the reader of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, holds other difficulties as well. One does not need to read far to start losing track of time and sequence, to sense the existence of a magical, supernatural world. In a novel with so many repetitions, the reader is bound to share also the characters' confusion, as in the case of Fernanda del Carpio. She expresses this disorder about time as she writes letters to her children in Brussels and Rome:

That endless correspondence made her lose her sense of time . . . she had been accustomed to keep track of days, months, and years, using as points of reference the dates set for the return of her children. But when they changed their plans time and time again, the dates became confused, the periods were mislaid, and one day

seemed so much like another that one could not feel them pass. (Rabassa, 1970:368).

Repetition is a major issue in Ricoeur's theory as well as in the novel. I tend to view the whole novel as a huge labyrinth in which the characters are trapped. The search itself undertakes a travel in which the linear chain of time is broken, and thus two qualities of time are put together; "the circularity of the imaginary travel and the linearity of the quest as such" (Ricoeur, 1980: 181). The longest-lived Buendía, the family matriarch Ursula, is best qualified to observe the extent to which the family is trapped in a cyclical labyrinth: "Once again she shuddered with the evidence that time was not passing, as she had just admitted, but that it was turning in a circle" (Rabassa, 1970: 285). This statement does not only convey despair, but also an illusion of an endless present. This repetition of character, events and their activities make Ursula feel that time is turning in a spiral way, an endless time that leads Ursula to old age.

## Common readers in the cyclical labyrinth

This idea of considering the novel from beginning to end as a huge labyrinth in which the characters are trapped, is reinforced by García Márquez. While writing the novel, he said, "there was much degrading activity, but it led nowhere. It got trapped in a labyrinth of temporal cycles" (De Toro, 1984:38). The complete history of the Buendía family emerges as a version of the labyrinth, but unlike José Arcadio Buendía, whose frustrated confrontation with chaotic reality leads to his failure, Aureliano Babilonia successfully finds his way through the maze becoming a new being. He has only one role in the novel, that of reader-decipherer, and in this role he is identified with the external reader-us. It is only when he penetrates "la proteción final," which is:

> radicaba en que Melquíades no había ordenado los hechos en el tiempo convencional de los hombres, sino que encontró un siglo de episodios cotidianos, de modo que todos coexistieran en un instante. (García Márquez, 1967:350).

[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 (421)] .

In doing this, he can decipher the manuscripts and discover both his unknown and his destiny that Amaranta Ursula was not his sister, but his aunt, and that the attack to Riohacha by Sir Francis Drake had only one purpose, "that they could seek each other through the most intricate labyrinths of blood until they would engender the mythological animal that was to bring the line to an end" (García Márquez, 1967:422). A major difference between the quests of the last José Arcadio Buendía and Aureliano Babilonia is that the former "penetrates the labyrinth of real life with all its unpredictable temporal and spatial incoherence, whereas the latter unravels the artificial complexities of a fictitious paradign of reality" (McMurray,1985: 85).

Memory is also an important factor often referred to in the novel. Many of the main characters succumb to the illusion of a remembered past because they are unable to accept a present

reality fashioned by the incidents of history. As an illustration, Colonel Aureliano Buendía, in order to escape living in the time of memories, involves himself in an endless activity-the fabrication of golden fish. This activity becomes a sickening repetition: "He exchanged little fishes for gold coins and then converted the coins into little fishes, and so on, with the result that he had to work all the harder with the more he sold in order to satisfy an exasperating vicious circle" that leads him to his old age (Rabassa, 1970:204).

Another interesting activity that refers to the important issue of memory is the game of the "gallo capón." This game is presented in the episode of the insomnia plague which is one of the most puzzling and least understood incidents of the novel. This activity is also exemplified by the style the writer uses throughout the paragraph:

It is an endless game in which the narrator asked if they wanted him to tell them the story about the capón, and when they answered yes, the narrator would say that he had not asked them to say yes, but whether they wanted him to tell them the story about the capón, and when they remained silent the

narrator told them that he had not asked them to remain silent but whether they wanted him to tell them the story bout the capón… and so on and on in a vicious circle (Rabassa, 1970:47).

This paragraph shows that recursive narrative style that echoes the circular pattern found throughout the novel. García Márquez writes in a style that in itself represents an endless circle and by the length of the sentences, gives the impression of the monotony of a continuous circle.

## CONCLUSION

One Hundred Years of Solitude is an interesting novel to apply some of the major aspects of Ricoeur's theory of time. Because of its circular narrative structure, I have been able to demonstrate how two times -"the circularity of the imaginary travel and the linearity of the quest as such"- are put together, so that we can move back and forth in narrative, making allusion to that reciprocity between narrativity and temporality that Ricoeur proposes in his theory (Ricoeur, 1980:181).

García Márquez's literary work synthesizes almost all levels of human reality including the mythical and historic, the humorous and tragic, and the fantastic and logical (McMurray, 1085:106). Its structural configuration represents a family (Buendía), a town (Macondo), a nation (Colombia), and a continent (Latin America). No matter in what way the novel is read, it is a wonderful literary piece likely to revive experiences for all those who have laughed with the adventures of Cervantes or become immersed in Faulkner's imaginary Yoknapatawpha county.

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