

IN MEMORIAM GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

Manning Clark Theatre – ANU - June 18th, 2014

“Unfulfilled expectations in No One writes to the Colonel”

Lecture by H. E. Mrs Clemencia Forero -Ucrós, Ambassador of Colombia

It is a great privilege to be here today at the Australian National University to commemorate the life and works of Gabriel García Márquez. I wish to express on this special occasion my gratitude to Professor John Minns and the ANCLAS team for supporting the Colombian Embassy in this effort.

I am particularly honoured by the participation of Roy Boland, Honorary Professor of the University of Sydney, who is well known for his knowledge of the works of several Latin-American writers and novelists, particularly Vargas Llosa and García Márquez. Congratulations, dear Professor, for the brilliant overview you have offered us tonight of the works of García Márquez.

Two months ago, on the 17th of April, our Nobel Laureate passed away. The Presidents of Colombia and Mexico were both present at a solemn funeral ceremony held at the Palacio de Bellas Artes and paid their condolences to Gabo’s wife, Mercedes, and his family. At the same time, on the southern coast of the Caribbean Sea, in Aracataca, Colombia, thousands of mourners gathered to show their deep affection and to pay their tribute to a great Colombian, in the tiny and remote town where Gabo grew up at the house of his grandparents, “la casa”, where he found his original sources of inspiration for the creation of his characters.

I am convinced that *No One writes to the Colonel* is a masterpiece and that its main character is an everlasting and moving symbol of our human condition. Tonight I would like to share with you the features of this short story, considered as a jewel among the works of Gabriel

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García Márquez, because of its narrative technique, its concision and in my own point of view, due to the unforgettable and universal meaning of its main character.

Gerald Martin, in his biography of García Márquez points out that this masterpiece of short fiction, like Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* "is almost perfect in its self-contained intensity, it's perfectly punctuated plot and its brilliantly prepared conclusion."¹

García Márquez himself acknowledges that the style in its cinematographic directness derived from journalism. The narrator becomes omniscient, and is situated in the present, from where he recalls a recent past, and a more distant historical background, following a classical framework. Sometimes he uses what Vargas Llosa calls a method of "Chinese boxes" and hidden facts that can bring back flashes from the past.²

"El pueblo". The village

The story does not take place in Macondo, the mythical village. It occurs in an unnamed small town, typified as "el pueblo", the village. The main features of the village are the river, the dusty plaza, the almond trees, the labyrinth of shops owned by Syrian merchants, known in the village as the Turks, the curlews, the church, and the cockpit. It could be any forgotten town in the north eastern region of Colombia. It might correspond to Sucre, a tiny municipality, well known to the Garcia Marquez family. Gabo was sent to school in Sucre and this is where years later he met his wife Mercedes.

The historical context

The village shares with Macondo the pervasive heat, the suffocating humidity, the ceaseless rains, the fauna and flora. The only communication with the world is the river; boats arrive every Friday and with them, the awaited mail. The village, like Macondo, is isolated, travellers

¹ Gerald Martin, "Gabriel García Márquez, A Life" p.213

² Mario Vargas Llosa, "Historia de un deicidio", p.374

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who arrive say the trip has taken them eight hours, but the narrator will never provide a very precise geographical reference.

The narrator gives the reader some clues about the historical context of the fiction. The civil wars that ravaged Colombia in the second half of the nineteenth century are part of a distant but determinant past. We learn that the Colonel, as the main character, took part in the last of these wars, called the War of the Thousand Days as the treasurer of the revolutionaries. To put an end to the conflict a treaty was signed and an association of veterans was created to defend their rights to receive pensions as an acknowledgement of the services rendered to the nation.

These are elements taken by García Márquez from the history of Colombia and the memories of his family, transmitted to him by the person he most admired and cherished: Colonel Nicolás Marquez, his grandfather, with whom Gabo lived as a child, in his home town, Aracataca. The Colonel fought as a combatant from the Liberal Party and survived at least two civil wars. Through the remembrances of his grandfather, the astonished grandson was able to relive the episodes of these wars. The grandfather waited endlessly for his pension, which he believed was a right granted by law. As Vargas Llosa recalls in his doctoral essay about Garcia Marquez, when Nicolás passed away, Gabo's grandmother, Tranquilina Iguarán, continued to wait for the pension, hoping that after her death her descendants could claim this well-deserved right.³

A more recent historical reference is presented by the narrator, which enables the reader to identify the political context of *No One writes to the Colonel*. The story is contemporary to the crisis of the Suez Canal, since a report on the crisis and its impact on Europe, appears on the newspapers that arrive to the village. This reference brings us to a particular moment in the

³ Gerald Martin "Gabriel García Márquez, A Life"

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history of Colombia, during the military rule of General Rojas Pinilla, a period from 1953 to 1957, when civil liberties were curtailed and censorship of the press was established.

The presence of political violence

Political violence is not described in detail. On the contrary, it is felt as an oppressive component of the life of the inhabitants of the village. Gradually the reader discovers that martial law is in vigour, that a curfew has been imposed and that censorship has been established. In the tailor's shop there is a sign that forbids to talk about politics.

Step by step we discover that the Colonel's only son, Agustín, had been assassinated because of political reasons. A summary of events in the country is distributed in the village for clandestine circulation. The tailor's shop is identified as the centre of revolutionary activities, supported by the friends of the Colonel's dead son.

Poverty haunts the daily life of the Colonel and his wife. It is present from the first page of the fiction:

“The Colonel took the top of the coffee and saw that there was only one little spoonful left. He removed the pot from the fire and scraped inside of the can with a knife until the last scrapings of the ground coffee, mixed with bits of rust fell into the pot.”⁴

Gerald Martin connects this atmosphere of poverty to the hard times endured by Gabo in Paris when “El Espectador” the newspaper he worked for in Colombia was closed and he lost his job. The historical time is precise, 1956, the Suez crisis and the authoritarian regime of Rojas in Colombia. In that year Gabo was living with a Spanish actress, Tachia, and according to Gerald Martin, the desperate story of the starving Colonel and his pragmatic

⁴ García Márquez, “No One writes to the Colonel”, p.1

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wife, who takes care of the household in times of hardship, originated in this period of deprivation.⁵

The main characters in “*No One writes to the Colonel*”

The civil wars in Colombia, the memories of the veterans, violence and repression in the fifties, hardships in Paris, those are the historical and biographical demons as Vargas Llosa calls the multiple sources of inspiration.

And then comes, the process of literary creation, through which all these cross-cutting issues will help the novelist to weave a masterpiece and to create a universal character. This is not yet the magic realism of Garcia Marquez in *A Hundred Years of Solitude*; it is rather a phase of realism and conciseness, inspired by writers such as Hemingway and Faulkner.

The story has many characters, some named and others unnamed, who circulate as well in other works of Garcia Marquez: the Mayor, the doctor, the postman, Father Angel, the lawyer, Don Sabas- the rich Arab merchant who has accumulated his wealth in illegal dealings with the Mayor-, Agustin the Colonel's son and his friends, who symbolize the resistance to oppression.

All these local characters provide the context for the creation of the Colonel as a universal character .He will be accompanied by his pragmatic wife. The rooster will become the symbol of hope, political rebellion and dignity.

Unfulfilled expectations and the essence of the main character

⁵ Gerald Martin, “Gabriel García Márquez, A Life” p.203-217.

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“Vivir es esperar, siempre anhelando, esperando. Solo el porvenir es sustancioso. El único camino es el mañana...”

“To live is to wait, always wishing, waiting. Only the future has a substance. Tomorrow is the only road.”

This is how Miguel de Unamuno, the famous Spanish philosopher, author of the essay “*The tragic sentiment of Life*”, “*El Sentimiento trágico de la Vida*”, defined existence as a flow geared by expectation and painful hope.

This feeling of unfulfilled expectations leads us to a bold comparison between the characters created by Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot* and the Colonel of García Márquez.

In both works, waiting as a characteristic of existence, becomes a prevailing feature of human life.

“For nearly sixty years-since the end of the last civil war, the Colonel had done nothing but wait. October was one of the few things which arrived.”⁶

Every Friday, the Colonel goes to the harbour hoping to receive the letter acknowledging his right to a pension as a veteran of the civil war. This frustrating repeated ceremony and existential ritual between the postman and the Colonel, takes place week after week in the presence of the town’s doctor who receives the national newspapers on the same day.

The postmaster delivered his mail. He put the rest in the bag and closed it again. The doctor got ready to read two personal letters, but before tearing open the envelopes he looked at the colonel. Then he looked at the colonel. Then he looked at the postmaster.

⁶ García Márquez, “No One writes to the Colonel”, p. 1

'Nothing for the colonel?'

The colonel was terrified. The postmaster tossed his bag onto his shoulder, got off the platform, and replied without turning his head:

'No one writes to the colonel.'⁷

In both works, what is more important than the story itself is the 'atmosphere', a veil of mystery that surrounds the characters. The plot is secondary. "Nothing happens, nobody arrives, nobody goes, it's terrible," says one of the characters of *Waiting for Godot* and the same sensation is felt in the village of *No One writes to the Colonel*.

Beckett's masterpiece develops in a universal and abstract setting. Two roamers, following any path, wait for Godot. The symbol is open to interpretation: it could be God, a supernatural force, a promise, social change, a person, even death. In any case what stands out is the concept of existence as a process of waiting. Godot represents the objective, trivial or transcendent, of this wait.

And through waiting, the characters experiment the flow of time. The Colonel has its own Godot: the arrival of the letter which will guarantee his pension or the possible victory of the rooster. The character is always moving towards these goals without any certainty of success.

In *No One writes to the Colonel*, the wife plays a pragmatic role, similar to Sancho Panza in contrast with Don Quixote. She never ceases to repeat to her husband the unfulfilled promises made to him by the politicians of the Liberal Party and the frustration of waiting endlessly for the letter:

'We've waited long enough ...One must have the patience of an ox, as you do, to wait for a letter for fifteen years.'⁸

⁷ Ibidem, p. 22



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In Beckett's play, waiting becomes tragical.

"Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it is awful!" claims Estragon.

Time has stopped. Pozzo, a character that appears in the second part of the play, experiments the absurdity of existence.

"Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then its night once more." ⁹

If external time is frustrating, the characters can turn to time as an inner dimension of the soul. There are moments of hope that mingle with periods of despair. Vladimir and Estragon think that may be it is possible to reach peace and satisfaction when Godot arrives. Tomorrow will be better.

"We are no longer alone, waiting for the night, waiting for Godot , waiting for...waiting. All evening we have struggled, unassisted. Now it's over. It's already tomorrow...Time flows again already. The sun will set, the moon will rise and we away...from here..."¹⁰

Nevertheless the appointment remains uncertain and undefined. Estragon doesn't remember the exact timing set for the encounter. Vladimir is not even sure about the nature of the proposal that will be made by Godot.

⁸ Ibidem, p.23

⁹ Samuel Becket, "Waiting for Godot", p.82

¹⁰ Ibidem



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How to survive while waiting?

Although the expectations of the Colonel are more concise, he nevertheless experiments fluctuations between trust and despair. The dialogues with his wife become every day more exasperating. The woman, who has a pragmatic approach to life, poses the obvious and unavoidable down to earth question: how could they survive while waiting?

The woman seems to ignore the moral pain she is inflicting on her husband, by forcing him to sell an old clock together with other treasured objects, part of the family heritage.

The Colonel is concerned, following the Spanish tradition of “honra”, “honour”, about keeping up appearances. He doesn’t want to reveal his needs and wishes to maintain his image at all costs. He is even ashamed of acknowledging that he is waiting for the letter. He doesn’t want to expose his dire economic situation. When the woman goes around town trying to sell the clock and a painting, the Colonel feels bitter.

“So now everybody knows that we are starving. “ He says.

The cruelty of the woman reaches a climax when she implacably refers to the failure of their lives, by listing the rights that the State did not safeguard and of the services that nobody ever took the care of acknowledging.

“You were also entitled to a job when they made you break your back for them at the elections. You were also entitled to the veteran’s pension after risking your neck in the civil war. Now everybody has his future assured and you’re dying of hunger, completely alone” ¹¹

¹¹ García Márquez, “No One writes to the Colonel”, p.67,68

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The rupture of habits and the end of expectations

In Beckett, Vladimir and Estragon will not break the endless process of waiting for Godot. In Garcia Marquez, the stubborn Colonel breaks the habit of waiting for the letter that never arrives. Ariel Dorfmann writer and critic, confirms the analogy we have been trying to establish between Waiting for Godot and No One writes to the Colonel, in his Essays on Contemporary Latin American Fiction, and affirms that while Beckett's characters are slaves of their expectations, the Colonel sets a barrier when he replaces his routine trip to the post office by trust on the victory of the rooster at the cockpit. ¹²

Bureaucracy proves to be the unsurmountable obstacle for the recognition of the Colonel's right to a pension. He tries to look for solutions by changing the lawyer in charge of his case. But hopes are scarce, as the lawyer points out. The scene between the lawyer and the Colonel reminds us of Kafka. He tries to trace the proof of claim and the lawyer says that would be impossible.

“ The Colonel became alarmed. As treasurer of the revolution in the district of Macondo, he had undertaken a difficult six-day journey with the funds of the civil war in two trunks roped to the back of a mule. He arrived at the camp of Neerlandia dragging the mule, which was dead from hunger, half an hour before the treaty was signed. Colonel Aureliano Buendia-quarter master general of the revolutionary forces on the Atlantic coast-held the receipt for the funds, and included the two trunks in his inventory of the surrender.

‘Those documents have an incalculable value’ the Colonel said. There’s a receipt from Colonel Aureliano Buendia, written in his own hand.

¹² Ariel Dorfmann, “Essays on Contemporary Latin American Fiction”

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'I agree', said the lawyer. 'But those documents have passed through thousands and thousands of hands, in thousands and thousands of offices, before they reached God knows which department in the War Ministry.'

'No official could fail to notice documents like those', the Colonel said.

'But the officials have changed many times in the last fifteen years', the lawyer pointed out.'

Just think about it; there have been seven Presidents, and each President changed his cabinet at least ten times, and each minister changed his staff at least a hundred times..."¹³

After this discouraging episode with the lawyer, the Colonel decides to assume the case personally and writes a petition to the capital. But under the pressure of the alarming economic circumstances, he abandons the issue of the pension which, as Ariel Dorfmann points out, might be inside the drawer of an anonymous bureaucrat in the capital and deposits his destiny in the victory of the rooster. The Colonel needs to test his illusion in a real battle.

The possible victory of the rooster becomes a symbol of personal dignity and even of collective vindication for the whole town.

While in *Waiting for Godot* we see two desolate characters, crippled by anxiety and fear, in the story of the Colonel, a moving and unforgettable character tries to find a reason to survive, a feeling of belonging, a certificate of existence, through the arrival of a letter, or the victory of the rooster. Like every one of us, he holds to an illusion, a possibility of change, a better tomorrow.

"Ni lo pasado puede ser más que como fue, ni cabe que lo presente sea más que como es, el puede ser es siempre futuro"

¹³ García Márquez, "No One writes to the Colonel", p.27-28

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“The past cannot be more than what has been, the present cannot be more than what it actually is, the only possibility lies in the future.”

This reflection about the nature of existence by Miguel De Unamuno can be applied to the unforgettable Colonel depicted by Gabo.

I will end my presentation by recalling the astonishing end or non -end of the story. Gerald Martin describes the last paragraph as “one of the most perfect in literature....The exhausted old man has managed to fall asleep but his exasperated wife, almost beside herself, shakes him violently and wakes him up. She wants to know what they will live on now that he has finally decided not to sell the fighting rooster but to prepare him for combat:

‘What will we eat?’

The Colonel had taken seventy five years –the seventy five years of his life, minute by minute- to arrive at that instant. He felt pure, explicit, invincible, at the moment he replied:

‘Shit.’ ¹⁴

‘Y mientras tanto qué comemos’, preguntó, y agarró al coronel por la franela. Lo sacudió con energía.

-‘Díme, qué comemos?’

El coronel necesitó setenta y cinco años-los setenta y cinco años de su vida, minuto a minuto-para llegar a ese instante. Se sintió puro, explícito, invencible, en el momento de responder:

-‘Mierda’.

¹⁴ García Márquez, “No One writes to the Colonel”, p.69

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Dignity and hope finally prevail over pragmatism.

“You can’t eat hope’, the woman said.

“You can’t eat it but it sustains you, ’the colonel replied”¹⁵

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¹⁵ Ibidem, p.43