

García Márquez's

Pentimenti

by JOSÉ MONTELONGO

On the morning of November 24, 2014, the New York Times published the news that The University of Texas at Austin had acquired the papers of Gabriel García Márquez. A few months earlier, Stephen Enniss, director of the university's Harry Ransom Center, and José Montelongo, librarian at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, paid a visit to the house where García Márquez lived for many years in Mexico City, to examine the contents of the writer's archive. In this piece, Montelongo talks about one of the many ways in which this collection will help scholars and admirers better understand the works of the Colombian author.

UNDERNEATH THE FINAL brushstrokes of great paintings, below the surface, there are sometimes marks of doubt, hidden lines and suppressed colors. These nearly invisible brushstrokes are called *pentimenti*—repentances, compunctions, remorse. I like the word *pentimenti* for obvious reasons—Italian sounds so very cool—but also because it evokes a sense of drawn-out struggle and internal debate. Masterpieces don't usually come to the world in one simple and spontaneous act of creation, like a goddess jumping out of the head of Zeus, fully formed and pristine. Artistic creation is usually a lot messier than that. It might not be too much of a stretch to venture a rule stating that, when dealing with a literary archive, the messier the better. Maybe not a rule, but a personal preference: the more *pentimenti* contained in an archive, the more I like it.

Typescript of Gabriel García Márquez's "One Hundred Years of Solitude."



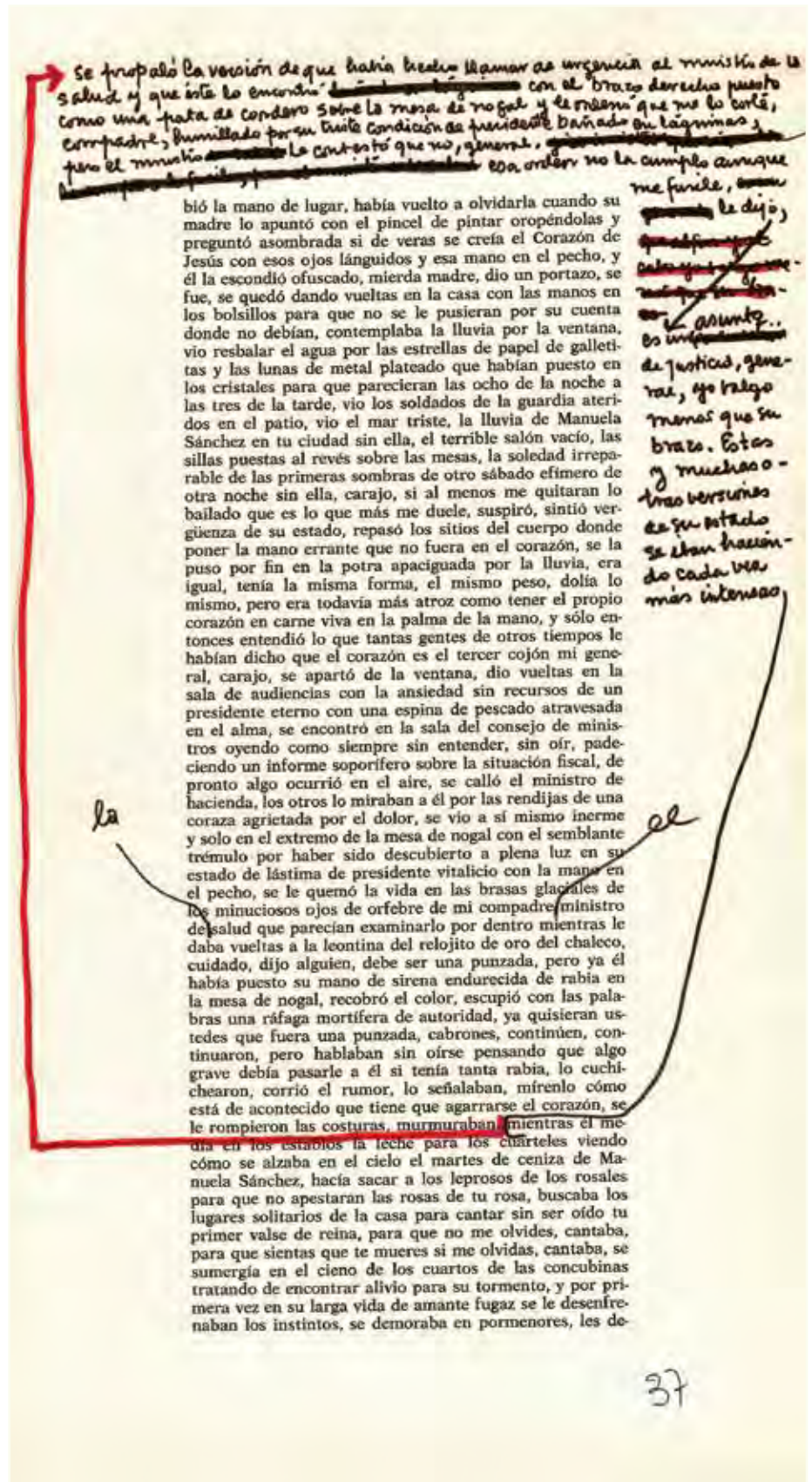
Image courtesy of Harry Ransom Center

The Gabriel García Márquez Archive, recently acquired by the Harry Ransom Center, contains numerous manuscripts with handwritten additions, crossed-out words and sentences, notes in the margins, excisions, discarded paragraphs, and other evidence of authorial repentances. A somewhat awkward combination of Italian and English would allow me to say that this is a very remorseful collection of papers.

Among the correspondence, there is one letter in which García Márquez reflects on his creative process after finishing *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, and says that he should have written this novel in verse, except he couldn't find the courage to do it. Even though in composing this book he ended up using the pedestrian means of prose writing, I think it reads like a long poem about power and decrepitude, a portrait of a Latin American despot who doesn't seem to know that at some point everybody has to die. In this archive, researchers will be able to study the very idiosyncratic prose of García Márquez as though he had spent his life crafting a lengthy, multi-volume poem with dozens of characters and plenty of melodramatic twists.

Remnants of the deliberative process of a writer are of immense value to scholars and amateurs because they provide a window into the artist's workshop. I mention both the literary critic and the common reader because García Márquez is an author who attained a most difficult and rare artistic achievement: nearly unanimous critical acclaim and a tremendously devoted and numerous readership worldwide. It is truly exceptional that so many readers around the world not only admired the writer but loved the person, and I think this happened because while reading his books they could feel the arrival of a unique sensation, the *nouveau frisson*, the strange and palpable addition of a new imaginary world that suddenly becomes part of one's own psyche.

García Márquez was a master of the short form in novellas that read like Greek tragedies set in the Caribbean, as well as a consummate long-distance literary runner, master of the sprawling, genealogic novel in which everything fits, including history and crime and love and miracles. Above all, he was an intoxicating stylist with the primal instincts of a storyteller. As the literary



Gabriel García Márquez's annotated and corrected galleys for "The Autumn of the Patriarch."

fuera a frustrar a última hora por esta condición imprevista. Hubiera preferido morir, renunciar, echarlo todo por la borda, antes que fallarle a Fermina Daza. Por fortuna el tío León XII no insistió. Cuando el sobrino cumplió los 55, lo reconoció como heredero único, y se retiró de la empresa por la fuerza mayor de sus 92 años.

Seis meses después, por acuerdo unánime de los socios, Florentino Ariza fue nombrado Presidente de la Junta Directiva y Director General. El día en que tomó posesión del cargo, después de la copa de champaña, el viejo pidió excusas por hablar sin levantarse del mecedor, pues ya no podía tenerse en pie, e improvisó un breve discurso que más bien pareció una elegía. Dijo que su vida había empezado y terminaba con dos acontecimientos providenciales. El primero, a los pocos meses de nacido, fue que el Libertador lo había cargado en sus brazos, durante su estancia en la población de Turbaco, cuando iba en su viaje desdichado hacia San

~~Pedro Alejandrino. La otra había sido encontrar, contra todos los obstáculos que le había interpuesto el destino, un sucesor digno de su empresa. Por último, tratando de desdramatizar el drama, concluyó.~~

-- La única frustración que me llevo de esta vida es la de haber cantado en tantos entierros, menos en el mío.

Para cerrar el acto, como no, cantó el aria de los adioses. La cantó a capella, como siempre, y todavía con voz firme. Florentino Ariza se conmovió, pero apenas si lo dejó notar en el temblor de la voz con que dio las gracias. Lo asumió como había hecho y pensado todo lo que había hecho y pensado en la vida, sólo por la determinación encarnizada de estar vivo y en tan buen estado como iba a estarlo 20 años más tarde -- dos semanas después de la muerte del doctor Juvenal Urbino -- cuando entró en su casa

Gabriel García Márquez's annotated typescript of "Love in the Time of Cholera."



Top: Gabriel García Márquez's notes for "The General and His Labyrinth." Bottom left: Gabriel García Márquez working on "One Hundred Years of Solitude." Bottom right: Gabriel García Márquez and his wife, Mercedes, in Bogotá, 1967.

critic Christopher Domínguez Michael has put it, García Márquez's imagination was so powerful and original that he will be remembered as a creator of myths, a Latin American Homer.

Within the holdings of the Harry Ransom Center, the literary manuscripts of García Márquez become part of a constellation of innovators that greatly impacted his own formation as a writer. William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, Jorge Luis Borges—these writers are at the same time his direct lineage and his peers. More than 150 UT faculty members engage with Latin America inside and outside the classroom walls, and numerous graduate and undergraduate students choose our university for

its emphasis on Latin America. With outstanding patience and perseverance and care, for almost one hundred years the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection has assembled one of the premier libraries devoted to the region. The Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies (LLILAS) integrates more than 30 academic departments across the university and ranks among the world's leading centers of its kind. All this to say that, in its new home at The University of Texas at Austin, the Gabriel García Márquez Archive is surrounded by a rich cultural milieu and finds itself in fertile ground for intellectual discussion. So much for remorse, let the celebration begin. ✨

José Montelongo is bibliographer for Mexican materials at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection. He accompanied Stephen Enniss, director of the Harry Ransom Center, to review the Gabriel García Márquez archives before they were purchased in fall 2014 by the center.

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