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The Novel behind the Novel

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Gabriel García Márquez provides an intimate look in this essay into some of the aesthetic and practical circumstances surrounding the origins and publication of Cien años de soledad. *The piece also touts several personalities involved in its creation. The text was originally published in* El País *in 2001, and appeared in translation in* Review *65 the following year.*

Sometime during August in 1966 my wife Mercedes and I made our way to the San Ángel post office in Mexico City to send the manuscript of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to Buenos Aires. It was a package of 590 typewritten, double-spaced pages on plain paper, which I was to send to Francisco (Paco) Porrúa at Editorial Sudamericana. The postal clerk put the package on the scale, made his calculations, and said: "That will cost you 82 pesos."

Mercedes counted out the bills and loose change she had in her bag and confronted me with reality: "We only have 53 pesos."

After over a year of penury, we were so used to these daily contretemps that we didn't think too hard about finding a solution. We opened the package, divided the manuscript in half and sent only one half to Buenos Aires, never even asking each other how we were going to get the money to send the rest. It was Friday and six o'clock in the afternoon: the post office would be closed until Monday, so we had the whole weekend to figure things out.

There were very few friends left from whom we could borrow money, and our best possessions were already sleeping the sleep of the just in the pawn shop. We still had, of course, the portable typewriter I'd used to write the novel during the past year at the rate of six hours a day, but we couldn't pawn that because we'd need it if I was going to earn any kind

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of living. We made a detailed inspection of the apartment and found two barely-pawnable items: the space heater in my study, which couldn't be worth much, and an electric mixer Soledad Mendoza had given us in Caracas as a wedding present. We also had our wedding rings, which we'd only used for the wedding itself. We never dared to pawn them because it was supposed to be bad luck. This time, Mercedes decided to bring them along in any case as an emergency reserve.

On Monday, at the earliest possible moment, we went to the nearest pawn shop, where we were well-known clients, and they lent us—without the rings—a bit more than what we needed. It was only when we were repacking the novel that we realized we'd sent the wrong half—we'd sent the second half before the first. Mercedes was not pleased, because she's never had much faith in destiny: "Now all we need is for the novel to be bad."

That sentence was the perfect culmination of the 18-month struggle we'd been involved in together to finish the book on which I'd founded all my hopes. Up until that time I'd published four others in seven years, for which I'd earned virtually nothing. *In Evil Hour* did win a prize of $3,000 in the Esso Colombiana competition—money I spent on the birth of our second son Gonzalo and on our first car.

We were living in a middle-class house in San Ángel Inn, the property of the most important official in the mayor's office, Luis Coudurier, among whose virtues was that of picking up the rent in person. Rodrigo, age six, and Gonzalo, three, had a nice garden to play in when they weren't attending school. I'd been the general coordinator of the magazines *Sucesos* and *La Familia,* where, for a good salary, I kept my promise not to write a line for two years. Carlos Fuentes and I had adapted an original story by Juan Rulfo, "The Golden Rooster," for the movies. It was filmed by Roberto Gavaldón. Also with Carlos Fuentes, I'd worked on the final film version of Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* for the director Carlos Velo. I'd written the script for *Tiempo de morir* (A Time to Die), Arturo Ripstein's first full-length feature film, and another called *Presagio* (Omen) with Luis Alcoriza. The little time I had left over I dedicated to a large number of odd jobs—advertising copy, television commercials, lyrics for songs—which produced enough income for me to live comfortably but not to go on writing stories and novels.

The fact was that I'd been tormented for a long time by the idea of writing an outsized novel, not only different from everything I'd written until then but different from everything I'd ever read. It was a kind of terror that came out of nowhere. It was very early in 1965, and I was driving with Mercedes and the boys for a weekend in Acapulco when I felt as if I had been struck by lightning so intense and powerful that I barely managed to miss a cow that was crossing the highway. Rodrigo shouted for joy: "When I grow up, I'm going to kill cows on the highway too."

I didn't have a moment of rest on the beach. On Monday, as soon as we got back to Mexico City, I sat down at the typewriter to write a first sentence I couldn't stand keeping inside myself any longer: "Many years later, facing the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía would remember that remote afternoon when his father brought him to see ice." From that moment on, I never stopped for even a day, I was in a kind of demolishing dream until the last line when Macondo went all to hell.

During the first months, I went on earning good money, but I needed more and more time to write the way I wanted. So I ended up working until very late at night just to meet deadlines until finally life became impossible. Little by little, I gave up everything until an implacable reality forced me once and for all to choose between writing or dying.

I had no doubt about it, because Mercedes—more than ever—took charge of everything when we'd used up all the credit we had with friends. She unexpectedly managed to get credit with the neighborhood grocer and with the butcher on the corner. Beginning with our first feelings of anguish, we'd resisted the temptation of interest loans, until, that is, we sewed up our hearts and made our first trip to the pawn shop. After the ephemeral relief we got from some small items, we had to fall back on the jewels Mercedes had been given by her family over the years. With the rigor of a surgeon, the jewelry expert examined the diamonds in the earrings, the emeralds in a necklace, the rubies in the rings. He weighed them, scrutinized them through his lens, and finally handed them back with a gesture like that of a bullfighter executing a *verónica:* "This is nothing but glass!"

We never had either the inclination or the time to find out when the original precious stones were substituted by shards of bottle glass, because the black bull of poverty was charging us from all sides. Even though it seems a lie, one of my most pressing problems was paper. I had the bad manners to think that typos, syntax, or grammatical errors were really errors in creation, so every time I detected them, I ripped up the page, tossed it into the wastepaper basket, and started all over again. Mercedes was wasting half our budget on pyramids made from reams of paper that didn't last a week. Perhaps that was one of my reasons for not using carbon paper.

Simple problems like that became so pressing that we didn't have the courage to avoid the final solution: pawning the car we'd just bought without suspecting that the cure would be more serious than the sickness. Yes, we got relief from our overdue bills, but when time came to pay the monthly interest, we were on the edge of the abyss. Luckily, our good and old friend Carlos Medina took it upon himself to pay it for us, and not only for one month but for several, until we managed to rescue the car. Only a few years ago, we found out that he'd had to pawn one of his own cars to pay the interest on ours.

Our best friends took turns visiting us every night. They would turn up as if by chance and, using the pretext of talking about magazines or books,

would accidentally leave market baskets. Carmen and Álvaro Mutis, the most assiduous, would encourage me to tell them what was going on in the chapter I was writing. Because of my superstition that if I told anything about what I was writing I'd scare my good spirits away, I simply fell back on emergency stories.

Carlos Fuentes, in spite of the terror he felt in those days about flying, was always coming and going from somewhere. His returns were a perpetual party where we could talk about our works in progress as if they were a single book. María Luisa Elío, with her clairvoyant vertigo, and Jomí García Ascot, her husband, paralyzed in a poetic stupor, would listen to my improvised tales as if they were coded messages from Divine Providence. Which is why I never had any doubt, from their first visits, that I would dedicate the book to them. Besides, I quickly realized that the reactions and enthusiasm of all our friends were illuminating the long corridors of my real novel.

Mercedes didn't mention any of her tricks to get credit until March of 1966—a year after I'd begun the book—when we owed three months rent. She was talking on the telephone with the owner of the building, as she frequently did in order to keep up his hopes, when she suddenly covered the speaker with her hand to ask me when I expected to finish the book.

Because of the rhythm I'd acquired in a year of practice, I calculated I needed six months. It was then that Mercedes ran up one of her astronomic bills, telling the patient landlord, without the slightest tremor in her voice: "We'll be able to pay you everything all at once in six months."

"Excuse me, ma'am," said the astonished landlord. "Do you realize that by then it will be an enormous sum?"

"I do realize it," said Mercedes impassively, "but by then we'll have everything resolved. Rest assured."

The gentleman, one of the most elegant and patient men we'd ever met, also answered without the slightest tremor in his voice: "Very well, ma'am. Your word is fine with me." And he consulted the calendar: "I'll expect you on the seventh of September."

He was wrong. It wasn't the seventh but the fourth, when we received the first unexpected check, the advance on the first edition.

We lived through the remaining months in total delirium. My closest friends, who knew our situation all too well, visited us more frequently than before, always loaded with miracles so we could go on living. Luis Alcoriza and his Austrian wife, Janet Riesenfeld Dunning, weren't frequent guests, but they did host historical parties with their wise friends and the most beautiful girls in the movies. Very often they were mere pretexts to see us. He was the only Spaniard who could be outside of Spain and still make a paella identical to the ones you get in Valencia, while she was able to keep us glued to our chairs with her skill as a classical dancer. The García Rieras, movie fanatics, would drag us to their house on

Sunday nights and infuse us with enough happy madness to face the week to come.

The novel by then was so far advanced that I allowed myself to continue enriching the false plot I would improvise when friends came by. I often heard the story recited by other people I'd never told it to, and I was surprised at the speed with which it grew and proliferated from mouth to mouth.

In August, as the days passed, I could see the end of the novel was just around the corner. I didn't use carbon paper, and there were no corner photocopy shops at that time, so there was only one original, about 2,000 pages long. It was pure ambrosia for Esperanza Araiza, the unforgettable Pera, one of the best typists Manuel Barbachano Ponce had in his Dracula's castle for poets and filmmakers in Colonia Cuauhtémoc. During her free time over the course of years, Pera had typed out great works by Mexican writers: Carlos Fuentes's *Where the Air is Clear,* Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo,* and several of Don Luis Buñuel's original screenplays among others. When I proposed she make a clean copy of the novel for me, I had nothing but a rough draft riddled with corrections—first in black ink and then in red ink to avoid confusion. But that was nothing for a woman used to the goings-on in that loony bin. She not only accepted the draft because she was curious to read it but because I'd pay her whatever I could on the spot and the rest when I got my first advance.

Pera copied a chapter a week while I emended the next with corrections of all sorts in inks of all colors—to avoid confusion. I did it that way not for the simple purpose of making the novel shorter but in order to achieve a maximum density. To the point where it was reduced to almost half the original.

Years later, Pera confessed that when she was carrying home the only copy in existence of the third chapter, which I'd just finished correcting, she slipped getting off the bus during a torrential rainstorm and the pages were left floating in the flooded street. She fished them out with the help of her fellow passengers, but they were soaked and almost illegible, so she dried them out at home with an iron.

My most moving moment during those days took place on Saturday when I did not have the corrected version of the next chapter ready, and I called Pera to tell her I'd deliver it on Monday. After a long hesitation, she worked up the courage to ask me if Aureliano Buendía would ever sleep with Remedios Moscote. When I told her he would, she gave a sigh of relief. "Glory be to God," she exclaimed. "If you hadn't told me, I wouldn't be able to sleep until Monday."

I'll never know how it came about that during those days I received a totally ad-hoc letter from Paco Porrúa—about whom I'd never heard a word—where he asked, in the name of Editorial Sudamericana, to publish my books, which he knew in their original editions. My heart broke, because all of them had come out with different publishing

companies on long-term contracts. The only consolation for Paco I could come up with was to answer that I was on the verge of finishing a very long novel under contract to no one, and that within a few days I could send him the finished version.

Paco Porrúa sent a telegram accepting the novel immediately followed up with a check for $500 as an advance. Just in time for the nine months of rent we'd agreed to pay at that time. We'd had no idea how we were going to do it, because I'd miscalculated how much time it would take me to finish it. In any case, Pera's clean copy with three carbons was ready two or three weeks later. Álvaro Mutis was the first to read the final copy before I sent it to the publisher. He disappeared for two days, and on the third called me in one of his cordial furies. He discovered that my novel was not really what I'd been telling my friends to amuse them, the version he'd been delightedly telling his own friends. "Damn it! You've made me look like a fool!," he shouted. "This book has nothing in common with what you told us." Then, laughing himself silly, he said, "And how right you were. This one is much better."

I don't remember if I had the title of the novel at that time or when or how it came to me. I haven't been able to determine it talking to my friends from that time or in any of the books about the novel. Luckily, some imaginative historian will come along to take on the task of inventing it.

The copy Álvaro Mutis read was the one we sent in two parts by mail. A second copy, a backup, was carried to Buenos Aires by Álvaro a short time later. The third circulated in Mexico City among the friends who'd accompanied us during our hard times. The fourth copy was the one I sent to Barranquilla so it could be read by three close friends who were also characters in the novel: Alfonso Fuenmayor, Germán Vargas, and Álvaro Cepeda, whose daughter Patricia still guards it as if it were a treasure.

When the first book reached us in June of 1967, Mercedes and I tore up the emended original that Pera used to make the clean copies. It never occurred to us, nor could it have, that it could be the most valuable of all, even though the third chapter was barely legible because of the rain and the ironing. My decision was neither innocent nor modest. We tore it up so no one could see the tricks of my secret carpentry. Even so, in other parts of the world there may be other copies, specifically the two sent to Editorial Sudamericana for the first printing. I always thought Paco Porrúa—who had a perfect right to do so—had kept them as relics. But he says he didn't, and his word is as good as gold.

When the publisher sent me the first copy of the proofs, I brought them —already corrected—to a party at the Alcorizas's house, because of the insatiable curiosity of the guest of honor, Don Luis Buñuel, who fabricated all sorts of magnificent speculations about the art of correcting—not for the sake of bettering the text but to hide things. I saw that Alcoriza was so fascinated by the conversation that right then and there I made the good

decision to dedicate the proofs to him: "For Luis and Janet, a repeated dedication that is the only true one: *from the friend who loves both of you most in this world."* Next to my signature, I wrote the year: 1967. The "repeated" and the underlined part derive from an earlier dedication I'd put in another book for the Alcorizas. Twenty-eight years later, when *One Hundred Years of Solitude* had finished its career, someone in the same house remembered that incident and suggested that the dedicated proofs were worth a fortune. Janet took them out of a drawer and put them on display in the living room, until someone else jokingly pointed out that the proofs could be their ticket out of poverty. It was then that Alcoriza made one of his typical scenes, striking both fists against his chest and shouting in his deepest theatrical voice and with melodramatic determination: "Why, I would rather die than sell this jewel dedicated to me by a friend!"

While the customary ovation was still in progress, I took out the same ballpoint pen I'd used the first time and which I still had, and wrote under the dedication from 18 years earlier: *Confirmed,* 1985. And I signed with my nickname again as I had the first time: Gabo. That is the document consisting of 180 pages with 1,026 corrections made by my own hand, which will be auctioned on September 21, 2001 at the Barcelona Book Fair. I will neither participate in nor benefit from the sale.

Let no one doubt that the auction is a legitimate act. What has upset some people is why the original galleys should have remained in my hands when by rights I was supposed to send them back to Buenos Aires so the final corrections could be incorporated into the first edition. The fact is that I never sent them back with my corrections. What I mailed was the list of corrections typed out line by line out of fear that the monstrous manuscript would be lost on the return trip.

Luis Alcoriza, always his own man, died in 1992 at the age of 71, in his house in Cuernavaca. Janet remained there where she died six years later, surrounded only by her small circle of faithful friends. Among them, the most faithful of all, Héctor Delgado, who'd adopted Luis and Janet as his parents, and who took care of them better than if they'd been his real parents during the lean times of old age. Before they died, they named him their heir. The only thing that doesn't seem right to me in this simultaneously improbable and memorable tale is that Luis and Janet lived their final years with hundreds of thousands of dollars safe and sound from the ravages of time and moths in the bottom of a drawer, all out of the invincible Iberian dignity of not selling the gift of the friend who loved them most in this world.

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