We had suspected for a long time that the man Gabriel was capable of miracles, so that when the miracle of the printing presses occurred we nodded our heads knowingly, but of course the foreknowledge of his sorcery did not release us from its power, and under the spell of that nostalgic witchcraft we arose from our wooden benches and garden swings and ran without once drawing breath to the place where the demented printing presses were breeding books faster than fruitflies, and the books leapt into our hands without our even having to stretch out our arms, the flood of books spilled out of the print room and knocked down the first arrivals at the presses, who succumbed deliriously to that terrible deluge of narrative as it covered the streets and the sidewalks and rose lap-high in the ground-floor rooms of all the houses for miles around, so that there was no one who could escape from that story, if you were blind or shut your eyes it did you no good because there were always voices reading aloud within earshot, we had all been ravished like willing virgins by that tale, which had the quality of convincing each reader that it was his personal autobiography, and then the book filled up our country and headed out to sea, and we understood that the phenomenon would not cease until the entire surface of the globe had been covered, until seas, mountains, underground railways and deserts had been completely clogged up by the endless copies emerging from the bewitched printing press . . .

It is now fifteen years since Gabriel García Márquez first published One Hundred Years of Solitude. During that time it has sold over four million copies in the Spanish language alone, and I don't know how many millions more in translation. The news of a new Márquez book takes over the front pages of Spanish-American dailies. Barrow-boys hawk copies in the streets. Critics commit suicide for lack of fresh superlatives. His latest book, Chronicle of a Death Foretold, had
a first printing in Spanish of considerably more than one million copies. Not the least extraordinary aspect of the work of 'Angel Gabriel' is its ability to make the real world behave in precisely the impossibly hyperbolic fashion of a Márquez story.

It seems that the greatest force at work on the imagination of Márquez himself is the memory of his grandmother. Many, more formal antecedents have been suggested for his art: he has himself admitted the influence of Faulkner, and the world of his fabulous Macondo is at least partly Yoknapatawpha County transported into the Colombian jungles. Then there's Borges, and behind the Borges the fons and origo of it all, Machado de Assis, author of three great novels, Epitaph of a Small Winner, Quincas Borba and Dom Casmurro that were far in advance of their times (1880, 1892 and 1900), light in touch and clearly the product of a proto-Márquezian imagination (see, for example, the use Machado makes of an 'anti-melancholy plaster' in Epitaph). And Márquez's genius for the unforgettable visual hyperbole—the Americans forcing a Latin dictator to give them the sea in payment of his debts, for instance, in The Autumn of the Patriarch: 'they took away the Caribbean in April, Ambassador Ewing's nautical engineers carried it off in numbered pieces to plant it far from the hurricanes in the blood-red dawns of Arizona'—may well have been sharpened by his years of writing for the movies. But the grandmother is more important than any of these.

In an interview with Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann, Márquez gives her credit for his language. 'She spoke that way.' 'She was a great storyteller.' Anita Desai has said of Indian households that the women are the keepers of the tales, and the same appears to be the case in South America. Márquez was raised by his grandparents, meeting his mother for the first time when he was seven or eight years old. His remark that nothing interesting ever happened to him after the age of eight becomes, therefore, particularly revealing. Of his grandparents, Márquez said to Harss and Dohmann: 'They had an enormous house, full of ghosts. They were very

superstitious and impressionable people. In every corner there were skeletons and memories, and after six in the evening you didn't dare leave your room. It was a world of fantastic terrors.' From the memory of that house, and using his grandmother's narrative voice as his own linguistic lodestone, Márquez began the building of Macondo.

But of course there is more to him than his granny. He left his childhood village of Aracataca when still very young, and found himself in an urban world whose definitions of reality were so different from those prevalent in the jungle as to be virtually incompatible. In One Hundred Years of Solitude, the assumption into heaven of Remedios the Beauty, the loveliest girl in the world, is treated as a completely expected occurrence, but the arrival of the first railway train to reach Macondo sends a woman screaming down the high street. 'It's coming,' she cries. 'Something frightful, like a kitchen dragging a village behind it.' Needless to say, the reactions of city folk to these two events would be exactly reversed. Márquez decided to elevate the village world-view above the urban one; this is the source of his fabulism.

The damage to reality in South America is at least as much political as cultural. In Márquez's experience, truth has been controlled to the point at which it has ceased to be possible to find out what it is. The only truth is that you are being lied to all the time. Márquez has always been intensely political; but his books are only obliquely to do with politics, dealing with public affairs only in terms of grand metaphors like Colonel Aureliano Buendía's military career or the colossally overblown figure of the Patriarch, who has one of his rivals served up as the main course at a banquet, and who, having overslept one day, decides that the afternoon is really the morning, so that people have to stand outside his windows at night holding up cardboard cut-outs of the sun.

El realismo mágico, magic realism, at least as practised by Márquez, is a development out of Surrealism that expresses a genuinely 'Third World' consciousness. It deals with what Naipaul has called 'half-made' societies, in which the impossibly old struggles against the appallingly new, in
which public corruptions and private anguish are somehow more garish and extreme than they ever get in the so-called ‘North’, where centuries of wealth and power have formed thick layers over the surface of what’s really going on. In the works of Márquez, as in the world he describes, impossible things happen constantly, and quite plausibly, out in the open under the midday sun. It would be a mistake to think of Márquez’s literary universe as an invented, self-referential, closed system. He is not writing about Middle-earth, but about the one we all inhabit. Macondo exists. That is its magic.

It sometimes seems, however, that Márquez is consciously trying to foster a myth of ‘Garcialand’. Compare the first sentence of One Hundred Years of Solitude with the first sentence of Chronicle of a Death Foretold: ‘Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice’ (One Hundred Years). And: ‘On the day they were going to kill him, Santiago Nasar got up at five-thirty in the morning to wait for the boat the bishop was coming on’ (Chronicle). Both books begin by invoking a violent death in the future and then retreating to consider an earlier, extraordinary event. The Autumn of the Patriarch, too, begins with a death and then circles back and around a life. It’s as though Márquez is asking us to link the books, to consider each in the light of the other. This suggestion is underlined by his use of certain types of stock character: the old soldier, the loose woman, the matriarch, the compromised priest, the anguished doctor. The plot of In Evil Hour, in which a town allows one person to become the scapegoat for what is in fact a crime committed by many hands—the fly-posting of satiric lampoons during the nights—is echoed in Chronicle of a Death Foretold, in which the citizens of another town, caught in the grip of a terrible disbelieving inertia, once again fail to prevent a killing, even though it has been endlessly ‘announced’ or ‘foretold’. These assonances in the Márquez œuvre are so pronounced that it’s easy to let them overpower the considerable differences of intent and achievement in his books.

For not only is Márquez bigger than his grandmother; he is also bigger than Macondo. The early writings look, in retrospect, like preparations for the great flight of One Hundred Years of Solitude, but even in those days Márquez was writing about two towns: Macondo and another, nameless one, which is more than just a sort of not-Macondo, but a much less mythologized place, a more ‘naturalistic’ one, insofar as anything is naturalistic in Márquez. This is the town of Los Funerales de la Mamá Grande (the English title, Big Mama’s Funeral, makes it sound like something out of Damon Runyon), and many of the stories in this collection, with the exception of the title story, in which the Pope comes to the funeral, are closer in feeling to early Hemingway than later Márquez. And ever since his great book, Márquez has been making a huge effort to get away from his mesmeric jungle settlement, to continue.

In The Autumn of the Patriarch, the interminable sentences are the formal expression of the interminable tyranny that is the book’s subject; a dictatorship so oppressive that all change, all possibility of development, is stifled. The power of the patriarch stops time, and the text proceeds to swirl and eddy around the stories of his reign, its non-linear form providing an exact analogy for the feeling of endless stasis. And in Chronicle of a Death Foretold, which looks at first sight like a reversion to the manner of his earlier days, he is in fact innovating again.

The Chronicle is about honour and its opposite, that is to say, dishonour, shame. The marriage of Bayardo San Roman and Angela Vicario ends on their wedding night when she names the young Arab, Santiago Nasar, as her previous lover. She is returned to her parents’ house and her previous lover. She is returned to her parents’ house and her brothers, the twins Pedro and Pablo Vicario, are thus faced with the obligation of killing Santiago to salvage their family’s good name. It is giving nothing away to reveal that the murder does take place. But the oddness and the quality of this
unforgettable short fable lies in the twins' reluctance to do what must be done. They boast continually of their intentions, so that it is a sort of miracle that Santiago Nasar never gets to hear about it; and the town's silence eventually forces the twins to perform their terrible deed. Bayardo San Roman, whose honour required him to reject the woman with whom he was besotted, enters a terrible decline after he does so; 'honor is love,' one of the characters says, but for Bayardo this is not the case. Angela Vicario, the source of it all, appears to survive the tragedy with more calm than most.

The manner in which this story is revealed is something new for Márquez. He uses the device of an unnamed, shadowy narrator visiting the scene of the killings many years later, and beginning an investigation into the past. This narrator, the text hints, is Márquez himself—at least, he has an aunt with that surname. And the town has many echoes of Macondo: Gerineldo Márquez makes a guest appearance here, and one of the characters has the evocative name, for fans of the earlier book, of Cotes. But whether it be Macondo or no, Márquez is, in these pages, writing at a greater distance from his material than ever before. The book and its narrator probe slowly, painfully, through the mists of half-accurate memories, equivocations, contradicting versions, trying to establish what happened and why; and achieve only provisional answers. The effect of this retrospective method is to make the Chronicle strangely elegiac in tone, as if Márquez feels that he has drifted away from his roots, and can only write about them now through veils of formal difficulty. Where all his previous books exude an air of absolute authority over the material, this one reeks of doubt. And the triumph of the book is that this new hesitancy, this abdication of Olympus, is turned to such excellent account, and becomes a source of strength; Chronicle of a Death Foretold, with its uncertainties, with its case-history format, is as haunting and as true as anything Márquez has written before.

It is also rather more didactic. Márquez has, in the past, taken sides in his fictions only where affairs of State were concerned: there are no good banana company bosses in his stories, and the idea of the masses, 'the people', is occasionally—for instance in the last few pages of The Autumn of the Patriarch—romanticized. But when he has written about the lives of 'the people', he has thus far forborne to judge. In Chronicle, however, the distancing has the effect of making it clear that Márquez is launching an attack on the macho ethic, on a narrow society in which terrible things happen with the inevitability of dreams. He has never written so disapprovingly before.

Chronicle of a Death Foretold is speech after long silence. For a time Márquez abjured fiction; we can only be grateful that he is back, his genius unaffected by the lay-off. There will not be a better book published in England this year.

1982

Clandestine in Chile

The first time Márquez wrote the true story of a man's life, in Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor, the man, previously a national hero, lost his reputation, and the newspaper in which the story was published closed down.

It took a brave man to agree to be Márquez's second non-fictional subject. One can only suppose that after the dangers to which Miguel Littín had exposed himself during his Chilean adventure, this literary risk didn't seem so great.

'One's homeland is where one is born, but it's also the place where one has a friend, the place where there is injustice, the place where one can contribute with one's art,' Littín once said. After a dozen years in exile from Pinochet's Chile, this distinguished film director chose to make an unusual artistic contribution to his forbidden homeland. 'The important thing,' his children had told him, 'is for you to pin a great long donkey's tail on Pinochet.' He promised them he would, and that it would be a tail 20,000 feet long. He underestimated his abilities. The tail grew to 105,000 feet.

It was, of course, a film, an uncensored portrait of Chile
after over a decade of tyranny, made clandestinely by a man for whom discovery would have meant death. To make the film he had to change his appearance completely, remembering not to laugh (his laugh, he confesses, proved impossible to disguise). Littín worked in Chile for six weeks, helped by the resistance and by friends, and even managed to film inside Pinochet's private office, pinning his celluloid tail, so to speak, to the very seat of power.

It's easy to see how the outsize drama of Littín's story, the story behind the film, appealed to García Márquez, a writer who has turned exaggeration into an art form. Clandestine in Chile is not, however, written, as the blurb claims, 'in the voice we know from the novels.' (You can't entirely blame the blurbist; the author himself asserts something similar in his preface.) This is Márquez at his least baroque and most self-effacing; understanding that the story has no need of magical realist embellishment, he tells it plainly, in the form of Littín's first-person narrative. That is to say: he acts as Littín's ghost. It is a little strange that Littín doesn't even get to share the writing credit with his illustrious shadow, but there it is.

Anyhow, Márquez's restraint proves extremely effective. Littín's story comes across with startling directness and force. Littín, transformed into a Uruguayan businessman or momio—a person so resistant to change that he might as well be dead... a mummy—bumps into his mother-in-law and, later, his mother, and in both cases the ladies fail to recognize him. He rebels constantly against the requirements of security, to the fury of his resistance 'wife' Elena and the tolerant irritation of the Chilean underground. And he completes his film.

This short, intense book offers a succession of extraordinary filmic images. There is a story of the man who burns himself to death to save his children from the government's torturers. There is a brief but potent account of the continuing cults of Allende and Neruda. 'This is a shitty government, but it's my government,' reads a sign paraded before Allende in a demonstration. Allende applauded, and went down to shake the protester by the hand. Even now, at Neruda's house at Isla Negra, the graffiti remember:

'Generals: Love never dies. Allende and Neruda live. One minute of darkness will not make us blind.' And there are, it is true, a couple of images we can recognize as classical Márquez, for example when Littín pays a surprise visit to his mother and finds that, without knowing why, she has prepared a great feast; or when Littín finds Santiago, formerly 'a city of private sentiments', full of highly demonstrative young lovers. 'I thought of something I had heard not long before in Madrid: 'Love blossoms in times of the plague.'"

Márquez once rashly swore never to publish a novel until Pinochet fell. Since then he has published Chronicle of a Death Foretold, Love in the Time of Cholera and a new work, The General in his Labyrinth, about Simón Bolívar. The broken promise will no doubt have made this book feel all the sweeter; he, too, had a tail to pin on the donkey. It clearly had the desired effect. 'On 28 November 1986, in Valparaíso,' we are told, 'the Chilean authorities impounded and burned 15,000 copies of this book.'

The book continues to exist, however; while Pinochet is, at long last, tottering on his plinth. To burn a book is not to destroy it. One minute of darkness will not make us blind.

1989