

Death Among the Ruins

The Autumn of the Patriarch
 by Gabriel García Márquez
 Translated from the Spanish
 by Gregory Rabassa
 Harper & Row, 269 pp., \$10

Reviewed by Stephen Koch

IN 1970 a long novel called *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, written by a previously admired, but ignored, Latin American short-story writer named Gabriel García Márquez, appeared in English translation. Though grounded in characteristic sources of Latin American fiction—most noticeably an intensely self-conscious awareness of modernist aesthetics (surrealism above all) in union with a marvelously vivid tradition of folkloristic storytelling—the book seemed to be in a class by itself. Page after page was so bizarre, so amazingly well written (even through the almost invisible veil of

translation), so brilliantly conceived, that it was impossible to think of the book in routine terms. I remember my own introduction to it. An editor, over drinks, shoved the book my way and said: “Read the first sentence. Just the first sentence.” I did, and I remember it still: “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.”

Everything to come sustains the promise of that first sentence. The book is a masterpiece. Passing through the generations of a mythic family in the hot isolation of the semitropics, it is a saga possessed throughout by an elegant, baroque conception of narrative time and of the passage of the years; a conception adumbrated by the stunning narrative trigonometry of that first sentence’s three-point location in the unnamed event to which the firing squad comes “later”; the

moment before death; and the childhood memory of the little boy from the semitropics discovering ice, to him a wonder.

AND NOW the much-awaited *Autumn of the Patriarch*, the book on which García Márquez has been working since *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, has appeared. In fairness to García Márquez and the reader, this book ought to be discussed outside the context of its predecessor. It seems a bore, not to say unjust, to keep turning the pages with the thought, This is not *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

It is not. It is quite different—not quite as exciting but nonetheless a creditable and remarkable performance in its own terms. Yet for all its obvious differences, *Autumn of the Patriarch* is artistically, formally, a companion volume to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a companion in contrast, an alternative in a rich artistic vision and dilemma.

In contrast to the first book’s elegant elaboration on time’s passage, *Autumn of the Patriarch* obliterates the sense of time in a series of verbal whirlwinds moving around a set of obsessional images. These are images of brutal power and of the fear of death expressed variously by and about a Latin American dictator who is found dead in his presidential palace. No one knows how long he has been dead; vultures are picking at his corpse; the palace is in ruins; pigs and chickens wander in the collapsing corridors. He has been a kind of Collier brother of autocracy. For years—centuries, it seems—he has ruled, his story lost in myth. He has lived among dogs and guards and dodges and plots. He has been glimpsed only through the windows of carriages and limousines, a brute surrounded by tawdry magnificence. In a Joycean delirium of language and associations, the novel proceeds to swirl around and through the megalomania of power, the strategies, the brutalities, the myths, and the hysteria of his endless, his timeless, reign of gloom. In the process García Márquez creates an intensely suggestive structure of meanings that radiate outward from the mythic general’s struggle to let absolutely *nothing* change in his war against death.

The Joycean manner has shipwrecked more than one first-rate practitioner, but García Márquez never loses mastery for a moment, and one is easily swept into his



“Don’t worry, Dad, right after the Bicentennial I’ll go back to emulating you.”

Stephen Koch, author of *Stargazer: Andy Warhol’s World & His Films*, appears frequently in these pages.

torrential invocations of autocracy and folklore and history and superstition. In the Joycean manner (it is here that Gregory Rabassa's seamless translation is, to my ear at least, most remarkable), his prose moves easily back and forth from gutter talk to the highest high style, and the political and spiritual ironies and passions resonate continuously. García Márquez himself seems almost delirious with his own incantatory prowess, and the cornucopia of his talent seems never to fail. Yet it is possible for the manner to pall. The pace and rhythm of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* were astonishingly varied. In the new book, the Joycean sentence assumes a slow, unchanging single beat and frequently rolls on for twenty pages at a time. Because the prose lacks the energy of the full stop, a certain slack monotony can and does sometimes set in. The sentence becomes a kind of vacuum cleaner of vividness, endlessly sucking one along.

Yet all of that is part of García Márquez's entire vision, and even if it is a weakness, one should not complain too much. In a typical late-modernist manner, he is obsessed with the problem of real life in the real world of real time, and of the solitude (that solitude mentioned in his great title) of the isolated imagination, intoxicated by itself. In contrast to the lush absorption in time's texture presented in his first novel, *Autumn of the Patriarch* finds its form in a brilliant delirium of language and finds its content in a crazed, comic megalomania of power that tries to hold off forever the natural processes of life, history, time itself. The ripples from that crackbrained static center spread everywhere: to politics and to what García Márquez seems to see as Latin America's war against history; to sex, with the general's mad notions about love and manhood; to the spiritual and emotional life; and to the obsession with control. Moving slowly through 100 years of solitude, García Márquez delivered himself over, paradoxically enough, to this solipsistic ecstasy, and if his new novel is in many ways a lesser achievement, it nonetheless would seem to have kept him true to himself, for it reads like a brilliant exorcism of that dilemma. When the corpse of that self-infatuated old man is finally cleared away, García Márquez speaks, on his final page, about the "crowds who look to the streets singing hymns of joy at the jubilant news of his death and . . . the rockets of jubilation . . . that announced to the world the good news that the uncountable time of eternity had come to an end." ©

Books in Brief

Amateurs

by Donald Barthelme
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 184 pp., \$7.95

DONALD BARTHELME is a wonderfully inventive writer, the finest practitioner in the American school of *ficciones* influenced along the way by Borges. His latest short-story collection, *Amateurs*, offers fresh surprise with uncanny juxtapositions of people, animals, insects, objects, and places of the environment and mind. Incongruities give epiphanies, for example, through a herd of porcupines rejected for admission to a university; an immense bull—ringing like a telephone—come to claim the wounded body of a *torero*; a circle of friends hanging a companion for no reason other than that "he had gone too far." The "literary" reader is recipient of not infrequent ironic allusions, such as the presence of the Fisher King at an exhibition of a turbine engine.

Yet, Barthelme is not arcane. He tells his unlikely tales through disembodied voices, echoing the dry deadpan of T.S. Eliot's "Sweeney Agonistes." Echoes of alienated Eliot—and shades of involuted Borges—notwithstanding, Barthelme does not camp out with the elitists. In his curious way, he is a sentimentalist, a democrat by temperament, a dyed-in-the-wool liberal. He offers *gestalts* on behalf of the multitude he champions, on behalf of

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