

*In Search of the Sacred Book: Religion and the Contemporary Latin American Novel.* By Aníbal González. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018. 244 pages.

Scholar Aníbal González's study on religion and the contemporary Latin American novel traces the presence of the sacred in narratives from the turn of the century to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, starting with Federico Gamboa's *Santa* (1903) and ending with Roberto Bolaño's *Los detectives salvajes* (1998). The book opens with an Introduction (3-31) placing the narratives to be discussed within a vast panorama of Western literature and thought. Here González sets the premises his book relies upon, emphasizing how Latin American writing is anchored in Western intellectual traditions. He begins by acknowledging that it may "seem paradoxical at first to examine the contacts between religion and the genre of the novel, given the markedly secular nature of prose fiction in Western culture" (3), especially considering "Lukács's famous dictum: 'The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God'" (3-4). Yet, as the genre has developed, the presence of elements such as magic, the supernatural, wizards and "found manuscripts" (4) "bring it closer to the sacred" (4). González quotes William A. Graham who asserts that "A text is only 'scripture' insofar as a group of persons perceives it to be sacred or holy, powerful and meaningful, possessed of an exalted authority, and in some fashion transcendent of, and hence distinct from, other speech and writing. That which is scripture for one group may be a meaningless, nonsensical, or even perversely false text for another" (5). Following Graham, González underscores what critics recognize as traits of sacred texts: "power, authority, unicity, inspiration, and eternity or antiquity" (5-6). González observes that "although divine inspiration has never been claimed seriously by any work in the novelistic tradition, one does find, particularly in totalizing narratives, the use of a prophetic tone and an implicit promise that the novel's readers will be able to achieve superior knowledge about reality" (8). As readers immerse themselves in the experience, they "feel reduced almost to nothingness. ... [T]his sensation of lost or diminished identity is regarded as one of the defining traits of the experience of the sacred or the holy" (11). Quoting from Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige* (1917), "the sublime is the privileged way of expressing the sacred in art" (12), González points out that since Greco-Roman antiquity the sacred has been close to the concept of the sublime (11). To the general traits characterizing sacred scriptures, González adds "faith, reading according to providentialist schemes, and a tendency to diminish or dissolve the reader's identity" (12). Yet, González remarks that "the novel almost until the twentieth century remained insistently within the realistic confines of the worldly" (14). Similarly, in *El arco y la lira* (1956) Octavio Paz emphasizes "the novel's link to 'the lay spirit' of modernity" (14-15). Furthermore, González writes that "From its origins, the Latin American novel views institutional religion ... with attitudes ranging from respectful distance to open antipathy" (15) as shown in Lizardi's *El periquillo sarniento* (1816) and others,

notably narratives by Vicente Fidel López, José Mármol, Manuel Bilbao, Justo Sierra O'Reilly, and Manuel Zeno Gandía. This tendency changes towards the end of the nineteenth century (21-22) with the emergence of the intellectual in modernista novels, characters who "made significant statements about issues of public concern" (23). González reminds us of the intellectual as a *clerc*, concept developed by Julien Benda (*La trahison des clercs*, 1927). According to the French author, this figure becomes involved in "political passions" (23) while forgetting the contemplative stance that previously defined intellectuals. This type of intellectual distinguishes himself by his "prophetic discourse," which appears in Latin American novels, both modernista and naturalist, at the turn of the century. In González's view, "prophetic discourse in the early twentieth-century Latin American novel is the point of departure of the process of sacralization (and, later, desacralization) of the novel [his] book attempts to describe" (23).

Chapter one, "Prophetic Discourse in the Naturalist Novel" (32-52), examines Mexican Federico Gamboa's *Santa* (1903) and Puerto Rican Manuel Zeno Gandía's *Redentores* (1925). In rescuing *Redentores*, a novel that did not circulate widely, the critic brings forth issues that may have kept it hidden as the narrative engages the political and economic changes imposed by the new colonial order after the U.S. took control of the island, hence becoming Zeno Gandía's response.

Chapter two, "The Other Theologian: Jorge Luis Borges and 'the Death of the Novel'" (53-80), begins recalling Flaubert's reply to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "An author in his book must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere" (54). Concerning the treatment of slavery, Flaubert advises: "Depict it; that's enough" (54). For González, this "poetics of impersonality ... could be called his 'narrative theology,' a body of ideas that would profoundly influence novelistic writing in his own century and in the twentieth century as well" (54). Moreover, "Flaubert's 'narrative theology' was also a 'negative theology' born out of his 'epistemological nihilism' (Donato)" (56). In "Flaubert y su destino ejemplar" (1932) Borges regards Flaubert "the first Adam of a new species" (56). Borges himself "developed broadly influential models for the artistic appropriations of religious discourse in contemporary Latin American narrative" (57). Particularly productive are González's comparatist insights on Borges's essays, especially "El arte narrativo y la magia" (64). He argues that the quest represented in Borges's stories "is of a rational nature, as was the search for divinity by the Gnostics of late antiquity and the Kabbalists of the Middle Ages" (71). In Borges, "reading is presented as an activity to be assumed as an adventure whose emotions or 'joys' arise from the experience of 'invention'" (71). González concludes with "El Aleph," Borges's most studied and cited text whose main theme, eternity, is the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter Three, "Tales from Eternity: María Luisa Bombal, Alejo Carpentier, Juan Rulfo" (81-118) focuses on *La amantada* (1938), *El reino de este mundo* (1949) and *Pedro Páramo* (1955), novels that

employ literary strategies to evoke aspects of the sacred. Bombal's centers on a protagonist who, laying on her coffin, recalls her relationships with loved ones, thus expressing the intimate emotions of a woman who felt she had spent her life submitting to others' needs. González finds a relationship between the "cosmic imagery evocative of the sublime" in Borges's "El Aleph" and the end of Bombal's novel (92). Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo*'s prologue has acquired a life of its own, separate from the novel. To experience the marvelous the reader must believe in it, suggests Carpentier, but, paradoxically, as González argues, in the prologue Carpentier maintains a distance "between his narrative 'I' and that phenomenon, portraying himself more as an observer than as a participant" (97). In Rulfo's novel the reader encounters a new reading contract, although no prologue-manifesto (109). The three novels masterly employ rhetorical strategies evoking the holy.

Chapter 4 "In Search of the Sacred Book: Julio Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez, José Lezama Lima" (119-155). González remarks that Boom narratives were not read considering their religious and sacred elements, "partly due to the increased secularization in Western intellectual and cultural life since the end of the nineteenth century" (122). Recently, however, these aspects are being explored even in novels not associated with magical realism or the fantastic. "The feeling of the sacred is evoked through a wide range of techniques and devices aimed at producing an effect of textual strangeness" (126).

In Chapter 5, "Desacralizations: Elena Poniatowska, Fernando Vallejo, Roberto Bolaño" (156-187), González focuses, first, on the continuities between the post-Boom and narratives of younger

authors, groups that share literature's relationship with other art forms, write science fiction and crime novels, reject nationalism, show interest in sexual identity, and a "growing trend toward *autoficción*" (158). Another important preoccupation is "'truth in fiction'" (158). Secondly, he explores the "desacralization of the Latin American novel" (162). González concludes that, in contrast to Europe and the United States, the sacralization of the Latin American novel "was not so much a reaction to increasing secularism but a response to the sociopolitical crises and tensions ..., caused partly by the United States' expansionist policies in the hemisphere" (186). In the Latin America of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the new generations have rejected the Boom writers' "'literary theology,' seeking alternative modes of fiction writing" (187).

Aníbal González's study is a superb contextualization of twentieth-century Latin American narrative within the tradition of Western literature and thought from the perspective of the sacred. Offering new readings of canonical texts he uncovers the continuity of the sacred as a pivotal category to understand one hundred years of literary production, showing religious manifestations are more pervasive than it appears on the surface. In his numerous highly informed and penetrating analyses González presents convincing and detailed arguments grounded in literary and philosophical knowledge, as well as solidly rooted in cultural and socio political traditions. This book is a *tour de force* and a must read for scholars and students of contemporary Latin American literature and culture.

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