

García Márquez, Gabriel (Aracataca, Colombia, 1927-Mexico City, 2014)

When Gabriel García Márquez died, newspapers around the world said that his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was the only book that competed with the Bible in sales in some countries. The relation with the Bible was not accidental: García Márquez told an interviewer that when he decided to be a writer he read all the novels in world literature from the Bible to the present, and in another interview he said that if people believed the Bible they could believe the things in his novel too. It is significant that he called the Bible a novel, and said that it was a "libro cojonudo," a book with testicles, that is, something with generative power. There are places in his work that this generative power can be felt, although García Márquez does not usually make explicit Biblical references.

One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967) begins with the founding of a town, Macondo, on the edge of an earthly paradise, and ends with the destruction of that town in a hurricane that reminds many readers of the Apocalypse. In fact, the last line of the novel says that when Aureliano Babilonia finished deciphering the parchment manuscripts left by Melquíades the town was destroyed, without a second chance or the possibility of repetition. This ironic rewriting of the Apocalypse, not as a beginning but as a definitive end, was recalled by García Márquez in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, in which he said that the people of Latin America would have a second chance: the message of the social gospel associated with liberation theology is expressed here in Biblical terms, though in a profane rather than a sacred way.

Some paradigmatic examples of Biblical generative power in the novel are the flood near its end which recalls the story of Noah (perhaps also present in the Spanish galleon found in the jungle near the beginning), characters who are endowed with extraordinary powers and appetites and who live to extreme old age, continuing to inhabit Macondo even after they fade into death, and the persistent presence of miracles: levitation, clouds of yellow butterflies, women who give off unearthly perfumes that penetrate into the skulls of the men who are captivated by them, nudity perceived as revelation. The prodigious experiences that the novel relates evoke a world of innocence prior to original sin, hint that the secret meaning of that world is concealed in a manuscript in an ancient language (here Sanskrit, not Hebrew), and suggest that books are a kind of tree of knowledge that tempt and transform their readers. The Bible is a polyphonic work, and García Márquez's novel aspires to be a book that includes many others, that speaks in a range of voices, and that moves easily from the real to the supernatural and back again.

Many Biblical names appear in García Márquez's work, not only in his most famous novel, though here we note the presence of Melquíades, Rebeca, Jacob, Solomon, Moses and Zosimo, Satan's challenge to God, and a proliferation of virgins. The Catalan bookseller notes in Aureliano Babilonia an interest in hermetic books, and affirms their usefulness in killing cockroaches, none perhaps as effective as the Old Testament. The world of the ancient Middle East comes to Macondo in the visits of the gypsies and the presence of "Turks" (used in Latin America to refer to Syrian and Lebanese immigrants) who are the merchants in the town; Melquíades has often been viewed as a version of the Wandering Jew, and a priest invokes that figure as a dangerous monster. The exuberant energy of the

novel, like God's voice in the whirlwind in the Book of Job, speaks of first and last things, of time and eternity, of individual and collective destiny.

Religious practices inspired by the Bible, including Christian, Jewish and Muslim beliefs and superstitions, abound in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, though often in a jocular way. For instance, when the priest drinks a cup of hot chocolate and levitates several centimeters off the ground, José Arcadio Buendía speaks several sentences in church Latin. The Christian calendar infuses the action of the novel, as when the many sons of Aureliano Buendía go to mass on Ash Wednesday, only to find that the cross on their foreheads is indelible, and will be used to identify them by their father's enemies, who hunt them down one by one. Ursula Iguarán, the matriarch, dies on Holy Thursday at the age of about a hundred and twenty. The wars in the novel between liberals and conservatives are allegedly about the secular or religious nature of the state, but in the final analysis this is less about belief than about the trappings of belief. García Márquez is more interested in the power of stories than in their truth; his major novel undoubtedly is a modern retelling of the Bible, one that emphasizes its ludic and extravagant dimensions.

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