



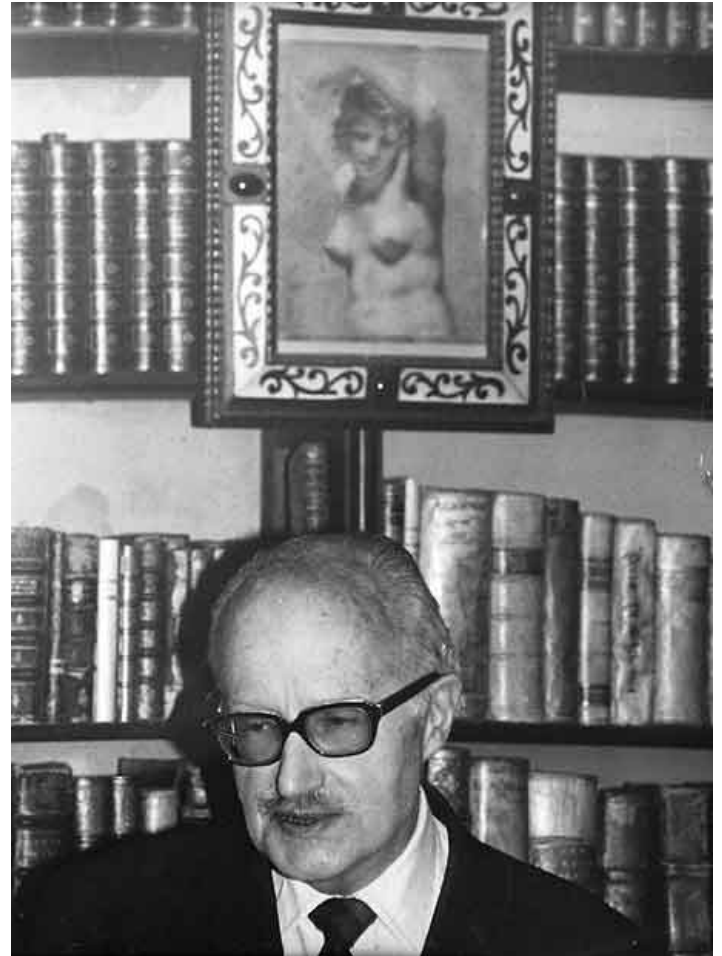
NICOLÁS GÓMEZ DÁVILA: AN AUTHENTIC REACTIONARY'S CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY

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I.

The philosophical, political, and theological thought of Don Nicolás Gómez Dávila (Bogotá, 1913 - 1994), perhaps one of the few authentic reactionaries of our time, rises as a reaction – and a most authentic one – to an intellectual, religious and aesthetic crisis whose invariably dire consequences form the heart of his overwhelming critical discourse: That crisis is that of the twentieth-century, with all that it implies.



All of Dávila's work is a serious and passionate attempt to root out some cursed codes that have upset the immutable essence of the human, down through the centuries (and, by extension, the essence of

the divine). But at the same time, his work establishes a solid, intellectual alternative to the inanity of our present era.

Unfinished philosopher, or consistent thinker who renounced the fatuous pretense of getting on the pulpit of philosophical pontification, Dávila never finished – that is, in writing - a philosophical system properly speaking, if he even sought to make such a claim, which would not have ceased to be ironic in a thinker of his stature and clairvoyance, for there is nothing dogmatic or conclusive in his work, if read intelligently. It is simply lucid.

Like Nietzsche, like the best of [Cioran](#), he resorted to the ingenious and flammable spark of the aphorism, capable of setting fire to the largest surface only with its friction. But instead of calling such outbreaks of genius aphorisms, he called them scholia (*escolios*), thus approaching Spinoza.

Though a thinker in fragments, Dávila offers, on the contrary, a philosophical discourse of absolute coherence and integrity, whose intellectual depth and paradoxical acuity is unparalleled among philosophers and thinkers in the area of contemporary Hispanicism (both in Spain and in Spanish America). His references, on the other hand, leave no room for doubt about the depth of thought that pervades his discourse: Thucydides, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Montaigne, [Juan Donoso Cortés](#), Jacob Burkhardt, are some of his distinguished professed teachers.

A miniaturist of language rather than a writer, a thinker rather than a scholar, and an artist of words; better than a mere philosopher, Dávila exemplified, with his illustrious reactionary position, one of the most notable, coherent and fortunate examples of ethical, aesthetic dignity and, if you will, spiritual dignity to be remembered.

Ignored for decades, his silent and monastic life, removed from the madding crowd, from the petty intellectual environments, from the miserable academic trivialities, went far beyond such conventions – his repeated refusal to publish and rub shoulders with power; his greatness of mind and keen sense of duty towards one's own self, led him to make of his existence a true aesthetic exercise, and that of an "authentic reactionary."



Secluded in his mansion, within the walls of a fabulous library of thirty thousand volumes, he took advantage of being well-off and devoted his life entirely to the complex exercise of thought. The most visible result of such efforts was his magnum opus, recovered for our benefit today, thanks to the effort, it must be said, of people like [Ernst Jünger](#), Botho Strauss or Franco Volpi, among other enthusiasts – and which, under the title of *Escolios a un texto implícito* (*Scholia to an Implicit Text*), heralds one of the most prodigious, valuable and imperishable examples of the effort of human thought during the 20th-century.

If the "heart" of Dávila's work is his *Escolios*, then the "brain" in his *Textos* – a strange but effective comparison: What the *Escolios* forcefully feel (the incendiary jolt of the aphorism), the *Textos* reason through (the discursive continuity of the prose). A satellite accessory for some, *Textos I* carries in its pages the "key" stone of construction; that is, the enigmatic implicit text, the standard of future battles. But that is how one of his best readers, [Francisco Pizano de Brigard](#), saw this work – and as far as we are concerned, we will stick with this option, which is very well justified – for where else can we turn? To the *Notes*, those conclusive sketches? To the fragmentary *Escolios*, despite their fullness? Is it worth the redundancy, the fragmentariness? Or perhaps the marginal texts, such as, the article entitled "The Authentic Reactionary," or the one entitled, "De jure," which remains inaccessible? In the absence of an "obvious" philosophical text, or even that which is simply obvious, we will take the aforementioned implicit text as the starting point for our precarious, well-intentioned exposition. So, let's get into the matter.

The first idea may seem simple to a reader wearied by established ideologies: Capitalism and communism have a similar goal in common. They are different masks that cover, therefore, the same face: The nature of man (displaced to the political realm). A broken dialogue, therefore, between two democracies, whose mimicry becomes a forced conflict: The bourgeois and the popular, eternal rivals: "If communism points out the economic contradictions (the alienation of man, abstract freedom, legal equality) of bourgeois societies – capitalism underlines, in parallel, the inefficiency of the economy, the totalitarian absorption of the individual, political slavery, the reestablishment of real inequality in communist societies."

In effect, Dávila does not seem to take a position on either one side or the other, even though the biased reader may consider him prone "to the right, and even to the extreme right." Big mistake: The author's reactionary discourse, extremely lucid, and part of the contradiction that directs communism and capitalism towards supposedly antagonistic goals – when, in fact, their goal is the same: Property, an obstacle for the former, a stimulus for the latter, without assuming otherwise: Ownership after all.

Bourgeois ideologies and ideologies of the proletariat consequently rush towards the same common hope: Man – "If communism denounces the bourgeois fraud, and capitalism the communist deception, both are historical mutants of the democratic principle, both yearn for a society where man is, in short, lord of his destiny."

The theological, political, cultural reading of Dávila thus ratifies democracy as an anthropotheistic religion; a theology of the man-god is thus categorized: "The divinity that democracy attributes to man is not a figure of rhetoric, a poetic image, an innocent hyperbole, in short – but a strict theological definition" – a theological definition inherent in the perverted nature of the modern, whose essential corruption is nothing but an unspeakable product of the fixed idea of the discourse of modernity: Progress.

Progress, which is theodicy of futuristic anthropotheism, otherwise justifies all the atrocities of man in the name of the progress of humanity. The process of progressive improvement cancels the time of man and restores the no-time of man-god. It is mechanistic and industrial orgy, which disrupts the useless human effort in the tedious transformation of matter. It is filthy monologue, which sacrifices perishable existences to its own ends in the name of the fixed idea, thus banishing the supreme value from itself, because as Dávila poetically affirms:

"Life is a value.
To live is to choose life."

Consequently, it thus becomes a theory of values which rests on two filial concepts: Atheism and progress, in need of an adequately emphatic rhetoric to penetrate deep among their potential victims.

The mere play of matter thus implies a universal determinism whose product is none other than a rigid universe, emptied of all possibility, where the cult of technology is the verb of the man-god, the principle of the sovereignty of the modern state.

Even so, the democratic era, and with it, economic development that is inherent to it, has money as the only universal value, its first and last reason: "Money is the only universal value that the pure democrat abides by, because it symbolizes a useful piece of nature, and because its acquisition is assignable to human effort alone. The cult of work, with which man flatters himself, is the engine of the capitalist economy; and the disdain for hereditary wealth, for the traditional authority of a name, for the gratuitous gifts of intelligence or beauty, expresses the puritanism that condemns, with pride, what the effort of man does not grant itself."

This terrifying fact degenerates, therefore, into economic robbery and petty individualism, generators of ethical indifference and intellectual anarchism that dominate the modern world.

Faced with such detritus, the only path that Dávila clings to is that of reactionary rebellion. His great work, *Escolios*, is about such a quixotic undertaking, an implicit text, putting into practice reactionary rebellion through his most powerful weapon: The word.

II.

Entering the immense garden of the *Escolios* – a Versailles on paper – is an arduous undertaking, although stimulating over time: Tasting its fruits, savoring them for the right time and extracting the nutritious pulp from them – that is, something that is not empty didacticism. But it will become a fruitful task of enlightened pleasure for the intelligent reader. In this sense, *Scholia to an Implicit Text* is a healthy elitist work, against the current, and very politically incorrect, aimed at reactionary minorities; or, failing that, at awakened minds whose thinking does not gravitate around the state of predetermined

ideas.

But what an effort to synthesize – if something like that can even be done, to further synthesize the essence of the rose – would go far beyond the narrow margins that we have imposed on ourselves. Even so, Dávila's thematic ambition transcends the heterogeneous and shapeless *mélange*, while advancing a compact mass, more or less consistent, and capable of standing up to a hypothetical attempt at analysis.

But as we say, it is that thematic ambition, that looking from various points of view through a gaze that is neither Manichean nor tendentious, which allows its author to carry out, in a subtle and distanced way, the most brilliant critical x-ray of modernity: Democracy, the nature of the politician, the essence of communism, the Marxist problematic, the Left and the Right, technology, liberalism, the idea of progress, life and death in modern society, art and literature, God and religion, the modern Church, culture, atheism, the bourgeoisie, the work of the historian, intelligence, youth, mediocrity, sex, Sade, Plato or Nietzsche, as well as the privileged figure of the reactionary, among many other philosophical questions of the first order appear and reappear like recurring milestones, closely linked to each other by a fine chain of ideas. Such accumulation, on the contrary, does not degenerate into a string of tedious evidence of a graphomaniac charlatan, but rather into a disturbing problem not without acute paradoxes. This makes *Scholia to an Implicit Text* a river-like book, always in motion, capable of tackling a profound (in the real sense of the word) question anywhere, without betraying its ultimate meaning.

Of course, one of the most violent and effective criticisms, which is not really effective, despite its abrupt reiteration, is that carried out against democracy, a democracy understood not in the abstract, but empirically in the light of facts, and therefore as fraud, as effective apotheosis of the dominant mediocrity: "The bigger a democratic country, the more mediocre its rulers have to be: They are elected by more people." And these mass rulers are none other than politicians, obviously: "Politicians, in democracy, are the condensers of imbecility." Imbecility inherent in the crowds themselves and the basis of the politician's explicit speech: "The democrat only respects the opinion that a large choir applauds."

This unquestionable statement the author rethinks throughout his discourse, with historical considerations: "Democratic killings belong to the logic of the system. The ancient massacres of man's illogism;" and from this, the following scholium: "Democracy celebrates the cult of humanity on a pyramid of skulls." Recently updated pyramid: A concert-tribute to the victims of terrorism? A

commemorative statue for a certain defender of democracy? In the name of democracy... But what exactly does democracy play out, play at?

Dávila does not hesitate to point with his pen to the main subject, a subject annihilated at the root: The stupid or the insane, depending on the times: "Democracy, in times of peace, has no more fervent supporter than the stupid, nor in times of revolution a collaborator more active than the madman." And to give consistency to his thesis, Dávila only has to look to the past: "Athenian democracy does not inspire, except those who ignore the Greek historians." The colossal figure of Thucydides, once again, strides forth to meet him.

In the midst of this abject masquerade that is modern democracy, the parodic figure of the politician is reduced to his most apt, creeping position: "The politician may not be able to think any stupidity, but he is always capable of saying it," because ultimately, even "the 'politician' with the most delicate conscience barely manages to be a modest whore."

An impassive critic of both the right and the left, as a genuine reactionary, Dávila throws some of his sharpest, sarcastic darts at the left: "The leftist miraculously avoids stepping on the calluses of the authentically powerful. The leftist only vilifies the simulacra of power." Dávila concludes that in any case "leftism is the banner under which the bourgeois mentality of the nineteenth-century maintains its hegemony into the twentieth." But, in the end, "the left and the right have signed, against the reactionary, a secret pact of perpetual aggression."

The critique of democracy thus finds a point of equilibrium in the critique of Marxism, whose illustrious exposition, once again, clings to historical-economic reasons, drawn even from the most prosaic daily life: "Marxists economically define the bourgeoisie, to hide from us that they belong to the bourgeoisie." But his criticism does not end in the petty contradictions of the mundane, since as a current of thought, "Marxism did not take a seat in the history of philosophy thanks to its philosophical teachings, but thanks to its political successes." Only a certain exception is allowed with the very promoter of the pseudoscience of yore: "Marx has been the only Marxist that Marxism did not abominate."

After these brilliant meanderings, the reactionary attack on modern society manifests everywhere, like a constant leitmotif, a kind of insect – of an invertebrate idea – that never ceases to whine behind Dávila's ear, even within the walls of his aristocratic library, there where he feels farthest from that despicable and sordid society composed of a violently homogeneous mob: "The anonymity of the

modern city is as intolerable as the familiarity of current customs. Life should resemble a room of well-educated people, where everyone knows each other but where no one embraces." The very product of that crude and democratic society, "the modern man tries to elaborate with lust, violence and vileness, the innocence of a hellish paradise."

It is not necessary to illustrate it - it is enough to open our eyes and look around us to confirm what has been said, since it is true that "modern society has been progressively reduced to whirlpools of animals in heat," while the two poles of the modern life are clearly business and sex. And in the midst of such nonsense, "recent generations circulate among the rubble of Western culture like caravans of Japanese tourists through the ruins of Palmyra;" mere dots. Such a terrifying and accurate panorama duly crystallizes into one of the author's greatest scholium: "Modern society does not educate to live but to serve."

In midst of such a desert of skulls, a mass grave where everyone fits but no one actually belongs - and that, and nothing else, is democracy in the long run - there is nothing left for man but to die gracefully. Here are truly authentic reactionary words: "When everyone wants to be something, it is only decent to be nothing."

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The [image](#) shows Poem of the Soul, 18, Reality by Louis Janmot.

