



NICOLÁS GÓMEZ DÁVILA: THE ANTIDEMOCRATIC REBEL

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"In our time, rebellion is reactionary, or it is nothing more than a hypocritical and facile sham."

In 1908 the young José Ortega y Gasset wrote in a letter to Ramiro de Maeztu, with a glorious outburst of youthful pedantry, "either one does literature or one does precision or one keeps quiet." Then Ortega spent almost half a century doing literature. Without precision and without silences. Beautiful and brilliant literature, perhaps the best Spanish prose since the 17th century. And certainly the best aphorisms since 1658, when Gracián died, and until 1954, when Nicolás Gómez Dávila began to write his notes and *Scholia*.

What happened, however, was that Ortega placed his aphorisms in essays of different genres, like flowers in a meadow. Sometimes the proportion of aphorisms in the text increased to the point that the flowers hid the meadow, or the trees hid the forest. Ortega y Gasset's philosophy is very literary and his literature, like his philosophy, is in essence aphoristic.

Of course, Ortega was not the only conscious or unconscious supporter of aphorisms. Unamuno is another great fan and so is Eugenio d'Ors. And Juan Ramón Jiménez is another, but with the bad luck that his aphorisms are narcissistic and soft; that is to say, cheesy.

However, in Spanish, for quite some time, there is no author of aphorisms comparable to the great Colombian writer Nicolás Gómez Dávila (1913-1994). A different question is whether it is justified to pay little attention to the essays of Gómez Dávila, always concentrating on his *Scholia*. Perhaps this happens because we do not understand that, as in the essays of Ortega or Eugenio d'Ors, the essay and its aphoristic content are inseparable. Of course, sometimes a paragraph with a more logical and discursive structure leads to a final aphorism, and enhances it with the strength and beauty of the most sustained prose. As an example, these two paragraphs, the first and the last, of a text that is considered of capital importance for being "the seminal idea" of the "implicit text" to which the *Scholia* allude:

Indifferent to the originality of my ideas, but jealous of their coherence, I try to draw here a scheme that orders, with the least possible arbitrariness, some scattered and foreign themes. Amanuensis of centuries, I only make a patchwork quilt (Texts, p. 55.).

The democratic purpose extinguishes, slowly, the luminaries of an immemorial worship. In the solitude of

man, obscene rites are prepared.

Tedium invades the universe, where man finds nothing but the insignificance of inert stone, or the repeated reflection of his slow face. When he realizes the vanity of his endeavor, man takes refuge in the atrocious lair of the wounded gods. Cruelty alone solaces his agony. Man forgets his impotence, and imitates the divine omnipotence, before the useless pain of another man whom he tortures. In the universe of the dead god and the aborted god, space, astonished, suspects that its hollowness is brushed by the smooth silk of wings. Against the supreme insurrection, a total rebellion raises us up. The complete rejection of the democratic doctrine is the final and meager redoubt of human freedom. In our time, rebellion is reactionary, or it is nothing but a hypocritical and easy farce. (Texts, pp. 83-84.)

Note the strength of the two final aphorisms, in the respective paragraphs. If the author had written them for a read speech, we would say that he was using techniques like a tamer with his whip to arouse the audience. But they fit perfectly into the logical argument of the essay, which otherwise contains many more of the aforementioned aphorisms. His short essayistic work constitutes a spectacular procession of scholia, aphorisms, apothegms, sentences and epigrams.

Everything but Sayings

But the most popular sayings do constitute part of the "implicit text". With apologies to our Olympian master. For example, his rampage in a profusion of sayings against fools, imbeciles and imbecility. They occupy more of the master's attention than the perverse themselves and their wickedness:

In every age, happily, there are fools indefinitely capable of the obvious (*Escolios a un texto implícito*, pp. 7-9).

There is nothing in the world that the enthusiasm of the imbecile does not degrade (*Escolios a un texto implícito*, p. 220).

Politicians, in democracy, are the condensers of imbecility (*Escolios a un texto implícito*, p. 221).

But in reality, for Gómez Dávila, the bad guy is a fool because he is too smart and his myopia leads him,

leads us all, to perdition. And the fool is bad for similar reasons. Or, to put it in common parlance, there is no good fool.

Certainly, the fact that Gómez Dávila brings out, I don't know whether the worst or the dumbest of his antagonistic admirers, is something more than a moral and literary curiosity, which he also has. For example, García Márquez said, apparently in private, "if he were not a leftist, he would agree on everything with Gómez Dávila." Because of medical advice, he had to keep quiet about which political person, or did he say this like some cholesterol patient, "if I were healthy, I would eat this ham?"

And Savater preferred the scholium "the opposite of absurdity is not reason but happiness"—because, Savater said, "it overcomes the pessimism/optimism dichotomy." I don't think so. Gómez Dávila says that "with good humor and pessimism, it is possible neither to be wrong nor to be bored." So, wherever the Colombian master is now, he will verify daily what I have just said—even posthumously he brings out either the worst or the silliest in his antagonistic admirers.

I see only four things for sure in Nicolás Gómez Dávila's thinking:

1. He knew how to write.
2. He believed in God. But "more than a Christian, perhaps I am a pagan who believes in Christ" (*Scholia*, page 44).
3. He did not believe in democracy. He was a liberal, insofar as he would never have said, applying it to anyone, what Juan Benet said about Solzhenitsyn: that his existence justified the existence of the Gulag, necessary to keep the decanter of communism locked up. And the fact is that Juan Benet was a scoundrel and Gómez Dávila was not. The latter, on the other hand, was capable of severe irony, something very different from Benet's knavery. Gómez Dávila wrote:

"The hullabaloo unleashed by the Second Vatican Council has shown the hygienic usefulness of the Holy Office."

By witnessing the "free expression of Catholic thought," we have seen that the intolerance of the old pontifical Rome was less an imperial limit against heresy than against rudeness and nonsense."

4. He was also reactionary; he did not believe in the modern dogma of progress. He was not a conservative: "If the reactionary does not awaken in the conservative, he was only a paralyzed progressive." He was not so much a right-winger as a reactionary:

"Popular suffrage is less absurd today than it was yesterday: not because majorities are more cultured but because minorities are less so."

The above quotation is the most clairvoyant of all those that deal with politics. It is also the most pessimistic.

I wish there were more reactionary and free-thinking Colombians like this one, walking their "good humor and pessimism" around the world or locked up in their libraries, free, reacting and thinking. In the end, perhaps they exist and remain hidden, out of modesty and elementary prudence.

The Marqués de Tamarón writes from Spain, and this article appears courtesy of [*El Manifiesto*](#).

