

PROLOGUE

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Literature, it would seem, is the opposite of philosophy. For philosophy is the attempt to produce ideas that are clear and distinct. Exactness can be regarded as the norm of thinking, analysis is the key activity of philosophy in this sense. Literature, in contrast, is the realm of aesthetic sensations and evaluations that can only claim subjective value. In light of the great success, in the modern world, of philosophers, at least in university departments, that emphasize analytical approaches, it must seem strange that a wholly different kind of thinking has gained considerable attention in a number of European countries, from Germany to Poland, Italy, France, and Spain, with occasional ripples even in Great Britain — this phenomenon is the Colombian thinker and writer Nicolás Gómez-Dávila (1913-1994).

This extraordinary man did not occupy a prestigious university position; he did not belong to the academic jetset, hopping from one fashionable but ultimately stale conference to the next. He was a productive thinker but did not rush his writings into print. But he was not only a thinker; first and foremost, he was a writer who developed an inimitable style in his so-called *escolios*, glosses, a form of writing that concentrates more in one sentence than some manage to cram in whole books. And Gómez-Dávila showed that clarity in writing by no means meant that you had to subscribe to Cartesian models of rationalism.

Nicolás Gómez-Dávila, who was born in Bogotá and lived for most of his life in his native Colombia, did not remain unknown to a small group of outsiders, writers and philosophers on the margins of the academy, free spirits who did not react with indignation to a comprehensive and hard-hitting criticism of the modern world. The writings of Gómez-Dávila spread almost surreptitiously by way of translations, reviews and essays — not the least thanks to the tireless efforts of writers like the German novelist Martin Mosebach, the Austrian publishing house Karolinger, the German philosopher Reinhart Maurer, the Italian philosopher Franco Volpi or the Polish philosopher and translator Krzysztof Urbanek. In fact, it is Polish scholars who have most recently contributed considerably to Gómez-Dávila scholarship. Shortly before his death, the Italian historian Marco Tangheroni finished a book on history explicitly taking Gómez-Dávila's aphorisms as his main inspiration. Today, quotations from the writings of Gómez-Dávila can be found in many places — paradoxically creating a small community of solitary individuals who are at odds with the dominant ways of thinking in modern societies.

Gómez-Dávila rejected the model of analytical philosophy, since he believed that philosophy becomes sclerotic when technical problems become dominant. The Colombian thinker almost only wrote so-called marginal glosses for a text in which these glosses are already present. These glosses often radically question what is regarded as the standard operating procedure in the academy. Gómez-Dávila's view of the academic world is part of his overall criticism of the modern world and particularly of man's place in it. This criticism of modernity and its scientifically-reductionist approach to the world implies, for Gómez-Dávila, an appreciation of the wisdom of the ages contained in literature but particularly so in common-places. Even philosophy, in this sense, can be regarded as a form of literature — in the case of Gómez-Dávila's glosses a form of literature that is meant to irritate their readers in the most profound way — alienating them from the present by bringing them into contact with the wisdom of old European traditions.

Nicolás Gómez-Dávila owned what must be regarded as one of the largest private libraries among 20th century writers — his library created the mental space for a literary work that is unique. His aphorisms are condensed from a long meditation on other writers and the world; they were brought forth by an “implicit library,” the vast and careful reading in which Gómez-Dávila engaged over many decades. For this work is nothing less than a universe of sharp thoughts, meticulously shaped so as to produce a maximum effect on the unsuspecting reader’s mind. Gómez-Dávila’s writings provide entry to an “implicit library” of all that is valuable in Western thought, forcing his readers to enter into thoughts never before experienced. For Gómez-Dávila’s readers need to recover from the initial shock of becoming acquainted with ideas, admirably honed and polished, that will appear to be “reactionary” to much of what counts as common sense in our time. Gómez-Dávila did in fact call himself a reactionary, a term of abuse in most cases. But he filled this concept with a positive meaning that can only be hinted at here: A proper understanding of what “reactionary” signifies for Gómez-Dávila must be left to the careful reader of the glosses in this volume.¹ Suffice it to say here that for Gómez-Dávila it implied a necessary reaction to the modern world’s rejection of the sovereignty of God as well as of intransigent standards of intellectual achievements. In fact, the very notion of a “reader” has, for Gómez-Dávila, something “reactionary” in the positive sense. For reading, in our age of speedy communication and evanescent yet ubiquitous images, has become endangered — reading, that is, in Nietzsche’s sense of slowly proceeding through a text, chewing on individual sentences, digesting what is read and transforming it into thoughts. The “reactionary” turned out to be a most fascinating literary mask, a mask that gave voice to an immortal truth to which Gómez-Dávila was loyal to the last.

Gómez-Dávila’s books bear only the most laconic of titles, offering no intimation of what to expect: *Notas* (1954), *Textos* (1959) and five volumes of *Escolios a un texto implícito* (2 vol. 1977; two further vol. *Nuevos escolios* 1986; one vol. *Sucesivos escolios* 1992). The characteristics of aphoristic speech — utmost compression and rejection of system-building — can be seen everywhere in Gómez-Dávila’s writings. But despite appearances to the contrary, even aphorisms may present a kind of system, even if it is a system of fragments that can only be put together as such by a careful reader after long waking nights of turning the pages.

Living on the margins of the modern world, Gómez-Dávila attacked it from the rear, being appalled by the spiritual desert and the aesthetic ugliness surrounding us everywhere. Deeply skeptical about modern attempts to glorify and divinize human beings as such, Gómez-Dávila affirmed the profound realism concerning human nature one can find in the Bible and the Greek classics such as the historian Thucydides. Modern philosophy appears immature and sentimental in contrast to the ripe meditations of Greek tragedy and Christian dogma, according to Gómez-Dávila. And modern politics, based on equally immature conceptions of man, often leads to disasters. *Modern man deals with the universe like a madman with an idiot*. Gómez-Dávila’s writings can be understood as an attempt to enlighten us about this very problem, looking at the world with what can appear as cynicism. But this is not the case. Not only is Gómez-Dávila’s thinking based on a deeply untheoretical reliance on God’s existence; the Colombian thinker also does not exclude himself from his many verdicts against stupidity. For the stupidity that he detects in so many expressions of modern thought and art is not alien to himself: *Life is an everyday combat against our own stupidity*. The modern prejudice of being without prejudices has nowhere been recognized more sharply than in Gómez-Dávila’s glosses. For nothing, he thought, was more dangerous than to point out his prejudices to someone who believes that he is free of them. And stupidity, according

to Gómez-Dávila, was by no means confined to people without education — on the contrary, an educated fool merely was enabled to extend his stupidity to a wide range of things.

Man, according to Gómez-Dávila, is not a completely transparent being. In fact, many *escolios* consider the limitations of our own self-understanding, thus providing a salutary skepticism concerning what human beings can know and achieve. Gómez-Dávila's aphorisms are critical of all ideologies precisely because ideologies always try to reduce the complex enigma that is man to a simple grand theory. For the same reason, Gómez-Dávila is also extremely wary of all philosophies of history, even religious ones, since they are always based on a pretense of knowledge that cannot be validated.

Man is an animal that cannot find restfulness in this life, since he cannot just live in a state of self-oblivion within the passing of time. In every instance, Gómez-Dávila claims, man is subjected or exposed to the radical fragmentation of the world, because there is no state in which he finds himself that does not wound his restless heart. Human beings strive for serenity but can only attain it at odd moments in which they find solace for their loneliness. This understanding of the basic structures of human existence can appear rather bleak, but it has to be remembered that Gómez-Dávila here paints a remorseless picture of the futility of human striving in order to highlight man's absolute dependence on God.

Gómez-Dávila did not think that the illness of modernity could be countered by striving for a utopian restoration of some past, as a common misunderstanding of "reaction" suggests. The reactionary in Gómez-Dávila's sense is no nostalgic enthusiast, but rather an incorruptible judge, a kind of medical doctor who determines what illness and sanity are. The reactionary diagnoses the illness but cannot provide a medical prescription. Healing the wounded heart of man requires the help of God.

Gómez-Dávila's keen sense for the dilemmas of modern life shows up in many of his aphorisms. Although harshly critical of socialism and communism, modern capitalist and industrialist society also comes in for severe criticism. For both forms of social organisation are based on the imperative to provide human beings with more and more material goods. But because the reactionary in Gómez-Dávila's sense is not only the most consistent ecologist but also the only true aestheticist, he is able to detect the truly destructive element of modern society, namely its pervasive ugliness. Only those, Gómez-Dávila maintains, who secretly propagate the admiration of the beautiful are successful conspirators against the modern world. The claims of beauty are intimately connected to the claims of the soul, a much endangered "thing" in modern life. For Gómez-Dávila, it is the soul which becomes beautiful by erecting a rank order of values within itself, a rank order which maintains the primacy of the beautiful as against the modern vindication of an aesthetics of ugliness. It is precisely the way we have come to accept the ugly as a normal part of our lives that Gómez-Dávila aims to disrupt — to be reactionary means above all to deconstruct automatisms.

Gómez-Dávila is intransigent on this particular point: The reactionary is a defender of the soul's claim to beauty and intelligence. Reactionary thinking therefore is identical with opposition to a world without beauty and dignity. It is, in fact, the affirmation of concrete beauty as a sign of intellectual self-respect in an age of widespread nihilism.

However, nothing could be farther from the truth than to suppose that Gómez-Dávila's aim was to convince the masses of his views. For Gómez-Dávila's ethics of the writer it is essential that he did not expect to have success as a bestseller. He was content with limited recognition, knowing full well that his way of thinking was alien to the ingrained stupidity of the modern world.

Likewise, the Colombian thinker rejected the notion of equality without exception as the principle of contemporary liberal political theology. Without deceiving himself about the actual historical weaknesses of ‘aristocracies’, Gómez-Dávila defended the valid principle of rank distinctions, because human beings lose their humanity once they begin to deny necessary distinctions of rank. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, at least for readers schooled in the prevailing notions of contemporary mass society, Gómez-Dávila also defended the necessity of hierarchical structures in society. He did so, because he recognized the presence of spaces of liberty in a society that was not organized according to some rationalistic principle. It is for this very reason that a reactionary thinker like Gómez-Dávila is deeply skeptical about all utopias, since he knows only too well that a policeman is hidden in everyone who dreams of an utopia.

Gómez-Dávila never made particular efforts to become famous or to make his books widely known, although there is a tape recording of some of his aphorisms, adding the aura of oral articulation to the austerity of his writing. Outside of Colombia only a tiny number of people became aware of Gómez-Dávila’s existence — he was visited, e.g., by the famous historian Arnold Toynbee. Gómez-Dávila’s attitude was democratic in religion, for he did not believe in the superior faith of intellectuals and theologians; but he was an elitist in terms of cultural achievement, because he knew that intellectual excellence cannot become popular. In fact, the cultural value of what can be grasped by everyone is negligible. One shudders when one considers what Gómez-Dávila would have made of contemporary education with its growing emphasis on formal training to the detriment of knowledge and aesthetic appreciation.

Gómez-Dávila reminds us of the power of the individual to resist the evils of mass society — the levelling tendencies in both aesthetics and ethics — by means of dignity and style. For this very reason Gómez-Dávila rejects the rejection of judgementalism ingrained in our egalitarian culture. It is this attitude that stands behind his claim that we should argue above all about taste, for all other errors are negligible.

Perhaps it is above all this apology of judgementalism in matters of taste that helps his readers to reject the heresy of formlessness prevailing today. In Germany, Gómez-Dávila’s influence in this matter could be seen in one of the most surprising bestsellers in recent years, Asfa-Wossen Asserate’s book on manners (*Manieren*, 2003), which featured many quotations of the Colombian writer. The pathos of distance to the vulgarity of modern everyday life is linked to a serenity that can only be explained with reference to deep faith in God. However, reactionary thinking and writing is opposed to any grid that would transform this kind of thinking into a “reactionary catechism.” Gómez-Dávila did not offer a system of reaction but rather a manifold variety of approaches toward a better understanding of our condition as imperfect beings in an imperfect world — a world in which the sacred truths are ruined. But as long as individuals like Gómez-Dávila live and write to transmit these truths to the future, there is at least some fragment of hope that the forces of intellectual conformism and mediocrity will not succeed in suppressing the “counter-happiness of the mind,” as the German poet Gottfried Benn called it. Gómez-Dávila’s greatest achievement may have been to open windows the very existence of which had been for the most part unknown. He thereby has enabled his readers to go on breathing in a suffocating atmosphere where fresh air is sorely needed.

Gómez-Dávila is first and foremost a writer of brilliant and hard-hitting sentences. His language is never obscure, his thinking is part of the tradition of *philosophia perennis*, the eternal philosophy, a philosophy that does not reject the wisdom of faith, because it is a way

of thinking that looks towards what is always valid, as opposed to what the fashions of the day present as good. Philosophizing in this way is the result of immense learning and thorough scholarship. But in the case of Gómez-Dávila it is not stifled by scholarship — for he knows the dangers of academic narrowness. Philosophy, according to Gómez-Dávila, only hibernates in universities. By writing as he did — thousands of aphorisms were the result of a lifetime of reading, reflection and conversation with friends — Gómez-Dávila did what he had to do in order to carry on the legacy of clothing ancient truths in the concrete materiality of his remarkable sentences.

¹ For a better understanding of this concept one should also consult Gómez-Dávila's book *Textos* as well as his essay *El reaccionario auténtico*.

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