

The Aphorisms of Nicolas Gomez-Davila — “Escolios a Un Texto Implícito”.

Translations made by Michael Gilleland.

(This page is no longer on the Web. Since Mr. Gilleland was sufficiently kind to include my own translations on his page, I'm returning the favor by retrieving his page and making it available again. — Nikos Salingaros).

Nicolás Gómez Dávila (1913-1994) is one of the greatest, if not the greatest, catholic conservative writers of the XXth century and in the same time ... the most forgotten. This Colombian philosopher is almost unknown even among traditional Catholics, not speaking about the popular press.

I hope that one day his works will be translated into English. In the meantime please read some samples, prepared by Michael Gilleland and Nikos A. Salingaros.

To compromise is to sacrifice a distant good to an immediate urgency. (I, 13)

With God there are only individuals. (I, 16)

Every goal other than God dishonors us. (I, 18)

An “ideal society” would be the graveyard of human greatness. (I, 19)

Democratic parliaments are not places where debate occurs but where popular absolutism registers its edicts. (I, 20)

Love of the people is an aristocratic calling. The democrat only loves the people at election time. (I, 21)

The individual shrinks in proportion as the state grows. (I, 21)

The authenticity of the feeling depends on the clarity of the thought. (I, 24)

To refuse to wonder is the mark of the beast. (I, 25)

The one who renounces seems weak to the one incapable of renunciation. (I, 25)

Genuine allegiance to an idea surpasses every psychological or social motivation. (I, 28)

Vulgarity consists in pretending to be what we are not. (I, 37)

The incoherent interlocutor is more irritating than the hostile one. (I, 39)

The genuine coherence of our ideas does not come from the reasoning that ties them together, but from the spiritual impulse that gives rise to them. (I, 40)

Confused ideas and muddy ponds appear deep. (I, 40)

A philosopher who adopts scientific notions predetermines his conclusions. (I, 47)

To think like our contemporaries is a recipe for prosperity and stupidity. (I, 53)

All literature is contemporary to the reader who knows how to read. (I, 57)

A happy existence is as much of a model as a virtuous one. (I, 62)

To depend on God alone is our true autonomy. (I, 65)

Violence is not necessary to destroy a civilization. Each civilization dies from indifference toward the unique values which created it. (I, 70)

Perfection is the point where what we can do and what we want to do coincide with what we ought to do. (I, 113)

Modern man does not love, but seeks refuge in love; does not hope, but seeks refuge in hope; does not believe, but seeks refuge in a dogma. (I, 212)

Every marriage of an intellectual with the communist party ends in adultery. (I, 237)

Modern man destroys more when he builds than when he destroys. (I, 251)

Contemporary literature, in each and every epoch, is the worst enemy of culture. A reader's limited time is wasted in reading a thousand books that blunt his critical sense and damage his literary sensibility. (I, 258)

The Biblical prophet doesn't predict the future, but bears witness to the presence of God in history. (I, 262)

Civilization is a poorly fortified encampment in the midst of rebellious tribes. (I, 268)

In an age in which the media broadcast countless pieces of foolishness, the educated man is defined not by what he knows, but by what he doesn't know.

Contemporary political ideologies are false in what they affirm and true in what they deny. (I, 275)

Ritual is an instrument of the sacred. Every innovation is a profanation. (I, 299)

The supreme aristocrat is not the feudal lord in his castle but the contemplative monk in his cell. (I, 306)

All epochs exhibit the same vices, but not all show the same virtues. In every age there are hovels, but only in some are there palaces. (I, 308)

The modern tragedy is not the tragedy of reason defeated but of reason triumphant. (I, 308)

Philosophy is a literary genre. (I, 312)

The study of myths belongs to metaphysics, not to psychology. (I, 314)

The writer who loves or hates is less persuasive than the one who loves and hates. (I, 315)

Modern man is a prisoner who thinks he is free because he refrains from touching the walls of his dungeon. (I, 315)

To have opinions is the best way to escape the obligation of thinking. (I, 324)

God is a nuisance for modern man. (I, 332)

The “ivory tower” has a bad reputation only among the inhabitants of intellectual hovels. (I, 338)

The Church founders without the ballast of “average Christians.” (I, 347)

I distrust every idea that doesn't seem obsolete and grotesque to my contemporaries. (I, 353)

The Church used to absolve sinners; today it has the gall to absolve sins. (I, 378)

There are not a few French historians who think that the history of the world is an episode in the history of France. (I, 386)

Many love humanity only in order to forget God with a clear conscience. (I, 388)

Nothing multiplies the number of fools so much as the example of celebrities. (I, 393)

Civilization seems to be the invention of a species now extinct. (I, 398)

In the Christian obsessed with “social justice” it isn't easy to discern whether charity is flourishing or faith is expiring. (I, 403)

Egalitarian ideas distort our perception of the present and, in addition, mutilate our vision of the past. (I, 448)

The punishment of the idealist consists in the triumph of his cause. (II, 22)

To be civilized is to be able to criticize what we believe without ceasing to believe in it. (II, 25)

Philosophy's aim is not to paint new objects but to give their true color to familiar objects. (II, 31)

Those who proclaim that the noble is despicable end up by proclaiming that the despicable is noble. (II, 36)

Poetry is the fingerprint of God in human clay. (II, 45)

Every solution seems trivial to the one who does not understand the problem. (II, 47)

The cultured man has the obligation to be intolerant. (II, 58)

The stupidity of an old man imagines itself to be wisdom; that of an adult, experience; that of a youth, genius. (II, 64)

Stupid ideas are immortal. Each new generation invents them anew. (II, 80)

He who speaks of his "generation" admits that he's part of a herd. (II, 81)

For the myth of a past golden age, present day humanity substitutes the myth of a future plastic age. (II, 88)

To be authentically modern is, in each and every age, a sign of mediocrity. (II, 88)

Only the problems of his time seem important to the fool. (II, 101)

Nations and individuals, with rare exceptions, comport themselves with decency only when circumstances permit no other choice. (II, 105)

Many things seem defensible, until we look at their defenders. (II, 115)

Of God one doesn't speak with any precision or seriousness except in poetry. (II, 125)

The imagination is the only place in the universe where it is possible to live. (II, 132)

Optimism is never faith in progress, but hope for a miracle. (II, 135)

The importance of an event is inversely proportional to the space which the newspapers devote to it. (II, 140)

An individual declares himself a member of some group or other with the goal of demanding in its name what he is ashamed to claim in his own name. (II, 142)

Politics is the pastime of empty souls. (II, 145)

To have a dialog with those who do not share our basic premises is nothing more than a stupid way to kill time. (II, 158)

Faith is not knowledge of an object but communion with it. (II, 169)

Poetry has died, asphyxiated by metaphors. (II, 175)

It is unjust to reproach the writers of today with bad taste, when the very notion of taste is dead. (II, 175)

If we believe in God, we should not say “I believe in God,” but “God believes in me.”

It is easier to forgive certain dislikes than to share certain enthusiasms. (II, 190)

The anger of imbeciles is less frightening than their benevolence. (II, 191)

Total freedom of expression does not compensate for lack of talent. (II, 194)

A cultivated soul is one where the din of the living does not drown out the music of the dead. (II, 195)

“To be useful to society” is the ambition, or excuse, of a prostitute. (II, 196)

Whoever betrays us never forgives us for his act of betrayal. (II, 197)

Every non-hierarchical society is divided in two. (II, 201)

The modern world seems invincible. Like the extinct dinosaurs. (II, 226)

Progress is hubris and nemesis fused together. (II, 226)

To be intelligent without ideas is the privilege of the artist. (II, 345)

There is nothing more common than transforming a duty which inconveniences us into an “ethical problem.” (II, 380)

The enemies of myth are not the friends of reality but of triviality. (II, 395)

The racist is annoyed because he secretly suspects that the races are equal. The anti-racist is annoyed because he secretly suspects that they are not. (II, 396)

Hierarchies are celestial. In hell all are equal. (II, 396)

Imperatives, ethical or esthetic, should be negative. Positive imperatives increase imposture. (II, 399)

The itch to be original is an affectation caused by a lack of talent. (II, 400)

The liturgy can only be spoken definitively in Latin. In a vulgar tongue it is vulgar. (II, 406)

The modern soul is a lunar landscape. (II, 410)

In the idiom of modern architecture nothing complicated can be said. (II, 417)

The wealthy man's sin isn't his wealth but the importance he attaches to it. (II, 418)

The number of votes which elect a ruler is not a measure of his legitimacy but of his mediocrity. (II, 425)

Ideas of the left give birth to revolutions. Revolutions give birth to ideas of the right. (II, 431)

Imitation, in the arts, is less harmful than rules. (II, 437)

Truth is so subtle that it never inspires as much confidence as an erroneous thesis. (II, 438)

Agricultural prosperity ennobles; industrial prosperity vulgarizes. (II, 445)

Adaptation to the modern world requires sclerosis of sensibility and degradation of character. (II, 445)

Nowadays public opinion is not the sum of private opinions. On the contrary, private opinions are an echo of public opinion. (II, 446)

Excess of politeness paralyzes; the lack of it brutalizes. (II, 449)

To be unaware of the putrefaction of the modern world is a symptom of contagion by it. (II, 451)

Intellectual vulgarity attracts voters like flies. (II, 454)

No public cause deserves the unlimited allegiance of an intelligent man. (II, 459)

History is a series of nights and days. Short days and protracted nights. (II, 468)

There is an illiteracy of the soul that no diploma cures. (II, 469)

God prefers an uncircumcised heart to a castrated mind. (II, 471)

The genuine reader is the one who reads for pleasure the books that others only study. (II, 486)

The function of revolutions is to destroy the illusions that created them. (II, 498)