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MANUEL GONZÁLEZ PRADA

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## Manuel González Prada: a Son's Memories

BY ALFREDO GONZÁLEZ PRADA

(Manuel González Prada is one of the greatest writers and thinkers that Latin America has produced. Born in Peru in 1848, he died in 1918, after a life of dignity, filled with courage and strife. His mentality was ahead of his day, and it is only now—twenty-five years after his death—that he is becoming a contemporary of the present Latin American generation. *“He was a hundred years in advance of his own time: therefore, he will continue to live in the hearts of the men of this century . . . He is the outstanding model of virile courage in our Continent. Very few men can look him face to face without a sense of inferiority, without feeling how far removed they are from his greatness.”* Thus has Arturo Torres-Ríoasco written about González Prada. A great writer, a great poet, a civic apostle of liberalism in Latin America, he personifies the revolutionary “anti”: anticolonial, anticatholic, antioligarchical, antitraditionalist. His activities as public speaker and journalist were intense; but he published only five books during his lifetime: two in prose, three in verse. *“His Páginas libres and Horas de lucha, essays on literature, religion and politics, are among the most pure and classical writings in all Spanish American Literature,”* says Philip Guedalla. Scarcely known in this country, none of his books have been translated. Since 1933, his son—who writes for *Books Abroad* the following recollections—has published eleven volumes of his posthumous works.—The Editors).

**I**T is a strange feeling to find myself writing about my father. My intention was never to do so. But having been so kindly requested by the Editor of *Books Abroad*, I felt unable to refuse. And I will try to convey, in unrelated impressions, bits of remembrances and a few

anecdotes, some side lights on the life, labor and leisure of a Peruvian writer of a past generation.

. . . . .

My father was tall—a little over six feet—very erect and of athletic build; with blue eyes, a perfect nose, silvery hair, an aggressive chin and an even more aggressive moustache à la Lord Kitchener. (Until the age of forty-five, he wore the Spanish *patillas*; but one day on the street, seeing himself in a mirror, “looking so silly with those long whiskers,” he entered a barber shop and had them shaved off.) He walked with a great deal of dignity, and this was, undoubtedly, the most striking characteristic of his personality. A Chilean journalist, Jorge Hübner Bezanilla, who in 1917 spent a few months in Lima, wrote, shortly after the death of my father, the following lines: “I saw him pass, a hundred times, through the streets of Lima: tall, magnificent, attracting all eyes. The elegant poise of his manner reflected the serenity of his soul. His personality was so strong that he conveyed the impression of a man capable of facing a tumultuous and hostile assembly and imposing immediate silence with only a gesture of his hand.”

At home he was quite different. Being one of the most belligerent writers Spanish America has produced, legend had him as a violent and embittered man. But the reality was very much different: he was calm and peaceful, gay and even playful. Strangely enough, this variance between the impression he created and what he really was, finds a curious parallel in his writings: all his prose is of a serious nature; a large part of his verse—principally the unpublished manuscripts—satirical and humorous.

Racially, my father was almost entirely Spanish. His family—on both sides—came from Galicia, the Celtic Northwestern region of the Iberian Peninsula; but he had a strain of Irish blood, through one of his maternal grandmothers, the daughter of a Spanish mother and an Irish father. This man—O’Phelan by name—was one of those religious refugees who during the eighteenth century had migrated from Ireland, sought haven in the Catholic colonies of the King of Spain and married women of their own faith in their adopted land. None of my father’s biographers (not even Luis Alberto Sánchez, the most inquiring of them all) have given much importance to the influence of this remote non-Spanish ancestry, and perhaps they are right . . . But it always surprised me to observe how his character possessed so many traits of the Irish race. Not to mention the physical appearance: for instance, his striking likeness to Parnell, a Parnell without the beard, but with the same nose,

the same eyes, the same luminous forehead and the same proud bearing.

We lived—my father, my mother and myself—in a small and attractive house in the central part of Lima, an old one-story building with a *patio* filled with plants and flowers, and a large honey-suckle vine where birds nested during the Spring. The house had six or seven rooms and a spacious *traspatio*, which is the equivalent of the American backyard. At the left side of the *patio*—on entering the house—was the *ventana de reja*, a small apartment of two rooms, with a grilled window looking out upon the street. (These *ventanas de reja*, now disappearing in the present day constructions of Lima, are one of the typical remnants of the Spanish-Colonial architecture.) It was here that during most of the thirty years my father lived in this house (1887–1918) he had his desk and his library.

As a rule, he would arise about seven in the morning; have breakfast with my mother and me, and withdraw to his study for the rest of the day, except during the interval for luncheon, or when he was inspired—as often happened—to call at the school for me, at the midday recess. I felt entirely free to interrupt him at any time I chose: he was the exact opposite of the disciplinarian, and my irruptions were, if not always welcome, at least gracefully tolerated. In his *escritorio* he would spend hours reading and writing, and most of the time only reading. I used to tease him and say: “But father, you do *nothing*, you *read* all the time.”

He would laugh with amusement; but make no reply, probably thinking of the malevolent accusation often launched at him of being “lazy.” His compatriots could hardly understand the inconspicuous toil of the *homme de lettres*. How could a man spend his days reading and writing? How could an intelligent man be satisfied with a small income and not seek a Government position or be engaged in some profitable enterprise? How could a man dedicate his life to literature, an occupation which in accordance with the accepted Spanish American standards was not supposed to produce, *per se*, any monetary returns? The Romans had Cicero’s three words for this type of life and called it *otium cum dignitate*; but the Peruvians of the past generations had just one word for it: laziness. . . .

He would sit on a most uncomfortable chair facing his desk, reading, taking notes, plunged in thought. This peculiar taste for sitting on a hard surface is very Spanish: wherever I see those hostile and angular *sillas de vaqueta* on which my forefathers sat, I understand the fortitude with which the Spaniards have been enabled to endure so many hardships through the centuries, not necessarily in the conquest of distant

lands, but in the so-called comforts of home. . . . On that chair, my father would sit for hours: upright, rigid, apparently never feeling the need of relaxing. Sometimes, the cat or the dog would jump on his lap, and like Buddha with the bird nesting on the top of his head, he would remain in the same position so as not to disturb the slumber of the animal.

Books held a great importance in my father's life. His library was not large (about three thousand volumes); but exceedingly well selected in accordance with his taste. Though a source of immense pleasure, it was a constant worry to him on account of the *polillas*, those voracious moths of the Peruvian coast, capable of boring through a book in a few hours and piercing it from cover to cover with the cruel perfection of a drill. Several times a year, the important ceremony of "the cleaning of the books" took place: every volume had to be meticulously anointed with kerosene mixed with certain chemicals (on the inside of each cover, so as not to soil the pages), the only more or less effective defense against the *polillas*. This work my father carried out personally, as well as the preparation of the protective compounds. He was an expert in chemistry—a survival of his farming days and his research in the manufacturing of starches—and took great interest in these experiments. I do not remember if he found the perfect formula for an insecticide; but he certainly succeeded in making his library the most odoriferous I have ever known in my life. . . .

To see him handle a book was a pleasure: he would treat even an ordinary edition with the utmost care and respect. He never defaced a page with the slightest pencil mark, but inserted at the end of the volume narrow strips of paper on which notes and references would be jotted down.

I remember a particular incident showing to what extremes his *bibliophilia* would drive him. One day, in Lima, my father and I were riding on a street car, facing a man absorbed in the perusal of a book. The man was common, but the volume was a splendid edition: an in-quarto with magnificent engravings, pages uncut. Suddenly, using the hand as a paperknife, the man plunged his fingers into the book, made a violent upward gesture and tore the pages, leaving the edges like saws. This happened two or three times. I looked at my father: he was pale with rage.

"Let's get out," he said to me. "If this barbarian continues, I'll strike him."

The "barbarian" was about to attack the next page, when the car stopped and we descended.

The picture appearing with these pages was taken by me in 1915. During a certain period of my youth, I busied myself around the house, the camera always ready for a snapshot, with the unbearable insistence of the novice. Being photographed was one of my father's phobias. To discourage my designs, he would make faces every time I threatened him with the lens, laughing with great gusto at this easy way of thwarting my intentions. But one day I caught him off guard . . . And there he is: sitting at the dining-room table, preparing mucilage for his papers.

The likeness is excellent; and the half-smile, typical of one of his most characteristic expressions, when humorous thoughts seemed to be playing behind the usual serenity of his face. He dressed for the street in the conventional manner; but on all other occasions he favored comfort, and the photograph shows him as he ordinarily appeared at home. He felt—to quote the words of George Bernard Shaw—that starched collars are a nuisance and that coats and trousers must “take human shape with knees and elbows.” The white stock (made by my mother) he invariably wore at home: I do not remember having seen him about the house with any other type of neck-piece.

This picture has a particular interest: my father died of a heart attack, immediately after luncheon, the 22nd of July, 1918, sitting at that very spot. He died as he always had desired: with lightning suddenness, not only spared a long illness—that terrible preface of death—but even all realization of the approaching end, so swiftly was he stricken.

With regard to health, he had been extraordinarily fortunate during his lifetime: never had he spent a day in a hospital nor suffered the knife of the surgeon in his flesh. He was not even to know the drill of the dentist: he died at seventy with his thirty-two teeth intact.

. . . .

Another of my father's phobias was letter writing. Letters could pile up on his desk, awaiting answers that never materialized. He maintained absolutely no correspondence, neither with friends nor with the many authors who sent him their books. To write a letter was a sort of physical impossibility: I remember having seen him, for long periods at a time, pen in hand, paper unmarked, his head apparently without a thought. In 1915, Rufino Blanco-Fombona published an essay on my father, one of the finest critical studies ever written in Latin America on a living author: my father never seemed able to find the time to address Blanco-Fombona a few lines.

Around 1900, he received a letter from Unamuno; surprisingly enough, he replied. An interesting correspondence might have ensued;

but in his second letter, Unamuno dwelt upon a favorite subject: his dislike of the French authors because "they write with excessive clarity." My father, for whom lucidity in expression was the *sine qua non* of the writer, disagreed with Unamuno's opinion; but unwilling to enter into a discussion, never answered his letter. Generously, the great Spanish philosopher bore no resentment and soon afterward spoke of my father with warm praise in his *Essays*. Concerning *Páginas libres* he said: "It is one of the few, one of the very few Latin American books that I have read more than once; and one of the few, one of the very few of which I have a vivid recollection."

. . . .

Apropos of discussion.

Being primordially a combative writer, a fighter, it appears strangely paradoxical that my father never maintained a polemical controversy. His strategy was to attack and always to attack, without defending himself nor replying to his antagonist. Neither insult nor slander could divert him from this line of conduct.

In one of his published essays he shows admiration for Renan's unconcern at the assaults of his adversaries. It is a casual remark. But among his unpublished manuscripts, I have found a clear-cut defense of this policy of indifference:

"Let us avoid controversies and toss the grain into the wind: from a thousand seeds, one will germinate; from a thousand words, one will find an ear. Embarking upon a discussion, we expose ourselves to be led by our opponent, to descend to the level to which he wishes to force us. We start with a monologue in the clouds, and end with a dialogue in the gutter.

"If discussion produces one result, it is to strengthen our convictions and to reveal our opponent more clearly. Alexandre Dumas advised: 'Never become involved in an argument: you will convince no one. Opinions are like nails: the harder you strike them, the deeper they become embedded.'"

. . . .

In Peru—one of the most conservative and reactionary countries of the Continent—my father is still considered a rebel. He fought with un-Peruvian persistence and fury against political corruption, religious bigotry, social injustice. More exactly than a rebel, he was a nonconformist, as most great writers are. But the remark of Cardinal de Retz, "on prend pour révolte tout ce qui n'est pas soumission," appears to be just as applicable to contemporary Latin America as it was to the France of Louis



XIV! And so, in his individualism, in his self-imposed isolation, in his solitary apostolate, my father could have repeated, referring to his own countrymen, the words of Byron in *Childe Harold*:

*"I stood  
Among them, but not of them."*

—*New York City.*



## Pythian Heritage

*(On the Nature of Poetic Inspiration)*

BY ROGER CAILLOIS

IT has always been a difficult task to distinguish between inspiration's part and labor's in the creation of a work of art. Each artist, in fact, is a law unto himself; and no matter what proportions of these elements he employs, his product may be either good or bad. But this is not enough for the theoreticians. Not to mention the philosophers, there are artists who announce a preference and undertake to erect it into a formula. The schools line up against each other, and it is not long till we find fanatics disdaining works of art which have been created according to principles differing from their own. One sees beauty only in order, another finds it only in heedless profusion. From doctrines, we arrive shortly at immutable laws. We are no longer content with a mere preference for labor or for enthusiasm. We are at the point where artistic creation must be entirely a matter of deliberate planning, or, at the other extreme, where conscious method is entirely eliminated.

It is astonishing that there can be a dispute here. These opposing principles, which do as a matter of fact lend themselves to a very neat antithesis, do not seem endowed with powers which make them independently efficacious. It is easy to understand how thoughtful premeditation may organize the architecture of a painting, a sonnet or a fugue. Planning can bring about effective combination of colors, rhythms, sounds, it can excite a need and satisfy it, it can produce premeditated surprise and suspense, it can set the stage for any desired effect, and by a skilful succession of hints, reminders, careful advances, make of the work a continuous joy to the soul and the senses. But this type of skill, consummate as it may sometimes be, is after all only regulative.