

**Menos constante que el viento**

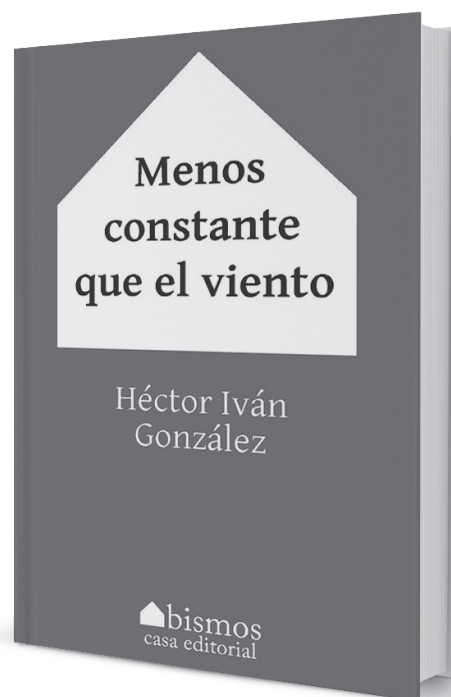
(Less Constant than the Wind)

*Héctor Iván González*

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I have no doubt that literature fulfills fundamental psychological and social functions. For many writers, it is the means to visibility, a way of calling attention to themselves, of standing out, or at least of not going unnoticed, a last resort, Whitman's barbaric yawp. It is also sometimes the only way of saying something, of getting it out, as though saying it was truly the equivalent of expelling or exorcizing. It can also be the only bearable way certain fantasies can be



realized; that is, dreaming while awake. Socially speaking, literature is an escape route, evasion. If humanity retains a minimum of sanity, it is thanks in part to the dose of inoffensive delirium that books, the cinema, and theater allow. It is also discourse: novels, poems, and essays modulate beliefs, orient ideas, regulate emotions. Literature fulfills all these functions, but, at least for those who hold it in esteem, for those who see it not as a means, but as an end in itself—as romantic as that might sound—not for sociologists, not for anthropologists, not for the political students of literature, and not even for its philosophers, but for those who, for example, read it and thank it in secret, literature would be a very small thing if it were not above all a pleasure, perhaps the most subtle, the most sophisticated pleasure, together with all the other arts.

Much else should be said about literary criticism. Yes, the criteria is for the individual who exercises the rite of appropriation, a way of possessing the work through observation, knowledge, sensibility—almost through touch—like in love, the definitive seal of an enormously personal relationship. It is the required road to wisdom. It is at times art in itself: creation that incorporates the re-combined and re-signified pieces of a previously existing product. At the same time, criticism is the arbiter of the relations between author and society. Whether we like it or not, it shows the way for collective tastes. It solves a problem for people who have neither the time nor, often, the aptitude: What to read; which novels to tackle first; which poet to listen to? Finding at least one critic to trust should be a task for any book aficionado. True criticism makes the powers that be of culture uncomfortable: publishing houses, communications channels, established authors, well-known reviewers. It is a call for intellectual and emotional rebellion. Without lively, fair, but accurate criticism, the literary milieu cannot be healthy. Neither, I am afraid, can society. Undoubtedly, criticism is fundamental for anyone who practices it and for the polis as a whole. However, for that same genre of romantics, that apparently idle minority, those pursuers of chimeras—the same ones, we forget, who with their creations distract the masses and the powerful from their day-to-day squalor—for them, if literary criticism is not above all a spur to enthusiasm, a playful bounce, a few hours in the park or an outing, it is nothing and is worth nothing.

Etymologically, having fun is the equivalent of “larking about.” *Menos constante que el viento* (Less Constant than the Wind) is an exercise in divertimento, in that precise sense.

The author takes a path, and walks down it unhurriedly; he arrives at a crossroads, takes one fork, jumps over to the main road, goes down it again, stops, throws himself down in the shade, resumes the slow march, reverses direction: in short, he fans out. He goes from one place to another following his curiosity, as he himself has said, and, by so doing, experiences the other nuance of the same term; he is entertained, he joins the playful flow of criticism. The first thing Héctor Iván González does in these pages is to quote Montaigne. Next, he distinguishes between exhaustive and disperse authors through satisfied, colloquial prose that remits us inevitably to the French essayist, in particular the meditations about his own writing. None of this is gratuitous. A “zigzagging” book of “broad frequencies,” given over to pleasure and, in addition, with a fortunate title, *Menos constante que el viento* belongs to the genre of thinking inaugurated by Montaigne.

Make no mistake about it, however: there should be no confusion between play and anarchy, between dissemination and dispersion, between a craving and indiscriminate gluttony. In his prologue, Héctor Iván mentions chance, his own “random behavior.” I wouldn’t use the word “chance.” Taste and urges can lead us to unexpected places, but not blindly. They seek their own satisfaction and know that they cannot find it just anywhere. That is why this book comes back time and again to Argentinean literature; that is why it never completely abandons Mexican literature; that is why it refers whenever it can to the French linguistic and cultural universe. In the temporal sphere, the twentieth century dominates. There are peeks at classical Greece, at the dawn of Italian humanism, at the second half of the nineteenth century. Where are the German romantics or the U.S. renaissance, among the enormous number of other movements that the author, in his journey, decides to bypass? It would be absurd to expect him to cover everything, but there are obvious preferences.

The focal distance is no less changing: in Héctor Iván’s book, there are close-ups that examine a single book by Paz, that dissect minutiae of his poetic expression; medium shots looking very closely at the drama of Jean Genet or Alfred Dreyfus; wide shots that situate an author like Dante in his social context; or panoramic shots: for example, the view of Latin American literature. However, I believe I can discern in Héctor Iván a certain weakness for the close-up, for the intimate, affective shot. In number, undoubtedly, the texts that impose a minimum critical distance predominate. But not in quality. The author counterposes to the strict, documented,

observation of Paz's poetry, to the fair, ordered dissection of Argentinean narrative, to the historical, distant review of Dante, the charm of Del Paso's complete narrative, the praise of William Faulkner, or the enthusiastic description of the work of Michon. But, above all, he counterposes to the former the literary portraits, perhaps less attractive, but more beloved, because they are warm and cordial, of people—not figures—like Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, Pura López Colomé, and strangely, like Nellie Campobello and Charles Baudelaire.

It is in this register, that of admiration but also of personal preferences, that Héctor Iván González produces his best prose. Not only in strictly grammatical terms. Here, like a plant that finally encounters the best environmental conditions, this author's writing flowers fully. Here, it no longer consists of hints and onsets; it is full creation. Some critics achieve their most assertive, most finished tone in adversity, in clashes, in denunciations. In my opinion, Héctor Iván achieves it in harmony, as implausible as that may sound. *Menos constante que el viento* does open with a rather belligerent spirit. It concludes, however, in a more conciliatory vein. The taste of incredulity at the poetry of Octavio Paz makes way little by little to faith in Baudelaire. And, for some reason, due to inspiration or because liking requires fine channels for expression, we find on his side true style, intensely significant words; that is, literary language.

I will just give a few examples. Of López Colomé, the author says that she moves in the opposite direction from the public, "as though her poetry was more a part of small confessions intoned with a mantilla and veil [when] dawn breaks" than of the acts of crowds. She refers to the light "not as simple [light], but the light that has been changed by the window of conscience." He clarifies that this work "is always a first time . . . , always has an inaugural encounter, a letting go without knowing if you're going to return. . . . You feel that the spirit, or, if you prefer, Pura's disposition spreads its wings

and begins to take flight." Of *Les Fleurs du mal* (The Flowers of Evil), he writes, "It is the biggest and most irrefutable answer that Man has given to industry. Baudelaire is the first author to perceive that there is more than one way to die, since in his understanding, death was not the end, but the leap to something different . . . ; in industrialization, he sees the most categorical way of ceasing to exist, of dissolving yourself in the masses without leaving a single trace." And he finishes by writing, "This is why, when Baudelaire returns to Shakespearean Denmark, he writes a *carpe diem* to his beautiful lover, Jeanne Duval, the most tender and loving, the most real poem ever written," the one that "from the second circle of Hell Petrarch would envy for ever and ever."

For congruence and friendship's sake, I must mention that in my opinion some of the book's sentences and paragraphs could do with certain modifications, certain strictly syntactical adjustments. Also, from time to time, the thread of the argument seems to get lost, such as in the first essay, subordinated perhaps to the enthusiasm, the otherwise positive zigzagging I mentioned at the start. Naturally, there are opinions I do not agree with; that is partially what the genre of the essay is all about. But I also recognize the noteworthy background in readings the author brings to his work, glimpsed here as it is in conversation; his critical spirit, which is receptive but also polemical, thoughtful, inquisitive; his literary talent, which is practically poetic; and, what is perhaps the most important, his love of his craft. *Menos constante que el viento* is a book that these attributes encourage. There are pages—many of them—on which we see them crystallize. This is the fruit of the game, of journeying on several levels, of a restless, uncommon, inconstant personality. ■■■

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