University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Spanish Language and Literature | Modern Languages and Literatures, Department of

12-22-1997

Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera 1859–1895

J. Agustín Pastén B.
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, japasten@ncsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/modlangspanish

Part of the Modern Languages Commons

Pastén B., J. Agustín, "Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera 1859–1895" (1997). *Spanish Language and Literature.* Paper 4.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/modlangspanish/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages and Literatures, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spanish Language and Literature by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera 1859–1895

Mexican poet and journalist

Manual Gutiérrez Nájera, one of Mexico's best-known writers of the 19th century, has traditionally been considered one of four precursors of the Modernist period of Spanish American literature (1875–1925). It was customarily believed that the genesis of *Modernismo* lay in innovations in poetry, thus it was Nájera's poetic production that received the attention of the critics for a long time. In the past few years, however, after careful examination of the modernist writers' prose works, scholars have discovered not only that the first signs of *Modernismo* are to be found in prose, but that Nájera's major contribution to the modernist enterprise were his prose pieces. This self-taught journalist who published his first article when he was only thirteen years old, was responsible for introducing the *crónica* (a prose genre derived from the French *chronique*) in Mexico. Nájera's literary production is divided into three genres: poetry, short fiction, and *crónicas*. An indefatigable writer who spent his entire life working for a multitude of Mexican newspapers and magazines, he is said to have published approximately 1,500 prose pieces under different pseudonyms. Of these, he put together only one collection of short stories in his lifetime: *Cuentos frágiles*, 1883 [Fragile Stories], a landmark in the evolution of the Spanish American short story. Nájera also contributed to the dissemination of *modernista* aesthetics with the publication of articles devoted to art (such as "El arte y el materialismo" [Art and Materialism]) and the foundation, in conjunction with Carlos Díaz Dufóo, of *Revista Azul* (1894), one of the most important *modernista* publications in Latin America. As regards his poetic production, el Duque Job (his favourite pen name) did not assemble his verses in book form; his first collection of poems was published posthumously by friends in 1896. As much in prose as in poetry, among Nájera's major influences were the French Romantics Victor Hugo, Alfred de Musset and Gérard de Nerval, and the Parnassians Leconte de Lisle and José María Heredia. Because of Nájera's love and admiration for the French writers of the period, he was often accused of being a Francophile who demonstrated little interest in national affairs, an accusation, it suffices to say, launched against most Spanish American *modernistas* which was far from the truth.

What credits Nájera with being the first important short-story writer in the Spanish American Modernist period are principally the short stories that appear in *Cuentos frágiles* and the posthumous *Cuentos color de humo*, 1898 [Smoked-Coloured Stories]; thereafter, some eighty-seven other fictional pieces were added to these two collections. The core of his narrative production arises from personal experience plus diverse readings of foreign literature which Nájera was often in the habit of translating and adapting to his own needs. Many of these short stories

began as *crónicas* or were inserted in the corpus of a *crónica* in order to make it more entertaining and alive to the public. In consequence, they display the formal aspects of the *crónicas*, like the presence of partially verifiable facts and manifold thematic unities, for instance. The writing of short stories liberated the writer's imagination from the daily constraints of journalism. Nájera's short fiction explores the psychological aspects of human existence, especially those that are located on the opposite pole of the rational, and occasionally delves into the psyche of a character or narrator, as for example in "La balada de Año Nuevo" [New Year's Ballad], the first short story of *Cuentos frágiles*. Plot, in most of these stories, occupies a subsidiary position to the treatment of human emotion. In countless of them the narrator shows a unique affinity for women and defenceless children. Some of his best known short stories are "La mañana de San Juan" [The Morning of St John's Day], "La novela del tranvía" [The Novel of the Streetcar], "Los amores del cometa" [The Loves of the Comet], "Historia de un peso falso [History of a False Peso] and "Juan el organista" [John the Organist]. "La mañana de San Juan" is indubitably his best story. In it the characteristically poetic nature of Nájera's prose serves the purpose of reconstructing a rather dramatic story in which children meet a sad end. In another fine story, "La novela del tranvía," the narrator, a passenger who by means of humorous language imagines the lives of fellow passengers as he observes them carefully, could be said to be the perfect incarnation of *El Duque Job* himself. The emphasis here does not reside either in what the passengers do for a living or in what they look like; what most interests the narrator is their possible thoughts and, most importantly, how he himself reacts to them.

The *crónicas* are undoubtedly the best part of Gutiérrez Nájera's prose production. Given their large quantity as well as their varied scope, it is not easy to reach a coherent definition of this portion of his prose writing. It suffices to say, none the less, that the writer made ample use of the French *chronique* and

adapted it comfortably to national aesthetic needs. Each of them constitutes a masterpiece, intelligently and elegantly crafted, but lacking in stylistic unity. Essentially, Nájera's *crónicas* are literary (unlike Martí's, which tend more to the political), not only because many of his short stories proceed from them, but because several are almost indistinguishable from prose poems. The writer did not express a strong interest in politics (even though he was for a time actively involved in them) and hence most of his *crónicas* are devoid of any clear ideological intent, this despite the fact that Nájera was writing at the heights of Porfirio Díaz's long dictatorship. In a number of *crónicas*, however, Nájera does allude to some of the evils that were undermining society, such as unemployment, prostitution and alcoholism; but he never attacked directly the Mexican authorities. Far more important than informing the public was to entertain it with fantasies and exaggerations. Nájera published his *crónicas* under various pseudonyms: Fru-Fru, M. Can-Can, Fritz, Junius, Pomponet, Ignotus, Omega, among others. At the same time, he frequently transposed an isolated section of a *crónica* into another *crónica* through the slight alteration of the original text. Nájera went as far as using texts written by others but publishing them as his own. In the series of *crónicas* entitled "Platos del día [Today's Specials], "Cosas que hacen falta" [Things that Are Missing] and "Pláticas doctrinales" [Doctrinal Chats], the narrator indulges in the use of humour and satire. Of great quality and sensibility are the uncounted *crónicas* dedicated to dramatic performances, literary essays and social events, composed with a simplicity and elegance worthy of any of the modernist writers that would come after him. Among his last *crónicas* are found two series of seven "sermons" called "Cuaresmas del Duque Job" [Duke Job's Lent], written with a humorous and intelligent language and addressed to women. These "sermons" are characterized by a very personal style: in them, Nájera displays the full scope of his lexical knowledge and writes with a mellifluous rhythm that makes for a very enjoyable reading. In the mid-1990s a signifi-

cant number of his *crónicas* have yet to be published.

With his poetry, Gutiérrez Nájera declared war on a poetic tradition that had run its course. To accomplish the uprooting task he had no choice but to turn to French literature. Aided especially by Musset, he was able to infuse a breath of fresh air into the tired verse of Spanish America. From Musset and other French Romantics and Parnassians, he learned to set his verses to music and to refine his poetic expression. It has even been claimed that, at least with respect to poetry, Nájera is more of a Romantic than a *modernista*, particularly because the major themes of his verse possess predominantly Romantic overtones and, ultimately, in view of the fact that he did not innovate Spanish metric. In most of his poems he, in effect, uses verses of eight and eleven syllables. It must be underscored that Nájera's Modernism in poetry is demonstrated by his alacrity to create beautiful and colourful objects by means of words; similarly, there is a conscious effort on the part of the poet to resist rhetorical and classical models. As regards the constructing of his verse, Nájera followed, almost to the tee, Wilde's dictums on aesthetics. He wrote poetry from 1875 until the very year of his death. In his youth, his beacons were Béquer and Campoamor; as time elapsed, Gautier, Mendès, Coppée, and the French writers aforementioned, began to exert their influence on him. Nájera's poetry is marked by an existential angst encountered in all Spanish American *modernistas*; in addition to this , moreover, a permeating and more immediate note of pain and suffering fills his verse. Outstanding representatives of this elegiac phase include "Mis enlutadas" [In Mourning] and "Nada es mío" [Nothing is Mine]. Francisco G. Guerrero divides Nájera's poetic production into various stages: love and religious themes play a key role in the first phase; in this phase there is no novelty in the use of adjectives and images. Later, however, Nájera's poetry begins to display some of Modernism's nascent attributes: heavy utilization of colours, especially white; insertion of French words in his strophes; use of synesthesia; and inclusion of elements of the

Catholic rite in preponderately pagan contexts. Among his best poems are "La duquesa Job," 1884 [Duchess Job], "Tristissima nox," 1884 [Saddest Night], "Mariposas," 1887 [Butterflies], "La serenata de Schubert," 1888 [Schubert's Serenata], and "De blanco, 1888 [In White].

J. AGUSTÍN PASTÉN B.

Biography

Born in Mexico City, 22 December 1859. Lived prosaic life. Never travelled abroad and seldom left Mexico City. Travelled, instead, in his imagination. Father a journalist, editor and man of letters. Mother instilled religious fervour into her son. Taught himself to read and write and had lessons from private tutors. Began journalistic career at the age of sixteen. In 1888, appointed deputy to National Congress for Texcoco. Married Cecilia Maillefert with whom he had two daughters: Cecilia and Margarita. Co-founder, with Carlos Diaz Dufóa, of the *Revista Azul* (1894) and director of the newspaper *El Partido Liberal*. In 1895 was elected president of the Associated Press of Mexico, but he died before being able to occupy this post.

Selected Works

Poetry

Poesías, Mexico City: Oficina Impresora del Timbre, 1896

Poesías completas, prologue by Francisco González Guerrero, Mexico City: Porrúa, 1966

Short Fiction and Sketches (crónicas)

Cuentos frágiles, Mexico City: Biblioteca Honrada, 1883

Hojas sueltas, prologue by Carlos Díz Dufóo, Mexico City: Antigua Imprenta de Murguía, 1912

Cuentos color de humo y Cuentos frágiles, Madrid: América, 1920

Obras inéditas. Crónicas de "Puck," selected by E.K. Mapes, New York: Hispanic Institute, 1943

Divagaciones y fantasías: crónicas de M.G. N., edited by Boyd G. Carter, Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1944

Cuaresma del Duque Job y otras artículos, edited by Francisco González Guerrero, Mexico City: Chapultepec, 1946

Crónicas y fantasías, prologue by Salvador Novo, Mexico City: W.M. Jackson, 1948

Escritos inéditos de sabor satírico, "Plato del día," edited by Boyd G. Carter, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1972

Compilations and Anthologies of Prose Works

Cuentos completos y otras narraciones, prologue, edition and notes by E.K. Mapes, Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1958

Obras, Crítica literaria I: Ideas y temas literarios. Literatura mexicana, compiled by E.K. Mapes; edited by Ernesto Mejía Sánchez, Mexico City: UNAM, 1959

Further Reading

Bondy, Liselotte, *El dolor en la poesía de Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera*, Mexico City: UNAM, 1962

Carter, Boyd G., *En torno a Gutiérrez Nájera y las letras mexicanas del siglo XIX*, Mexico City: Botas, 1960

___ "Gutiérrez Nájera y Martí como iniciadores del Modernismo," *Revista Iberoamericana* 28 (1962)

Gálvez, Marina, "Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera," in *Del neoclasicismo al modernismo*, edited by Luis Íñigo Madrigal, Madrid: Cátedra, 1987 [Volume 2 of *Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana*, 2 vols, 1982–87]

Gómez del Prado, Carlos, *Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera: vida y obra*, Mexico City: Andrea and East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1964

González, Anibal, *La crónica modernista hispanoamericana*, Madrid: Porrúa Turanzas, 1983

Kosloff, Alexander, "Técnica de los cuentos de Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera," *Revista Iberoamericana*, vols 19 (1954) and 20 (1955)

Mapes, E. K., "The First Published Writings of Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera," *Hispanic Review*, vol. 5/3 (1937)

___ "The Pseudonyms of Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera," *PMLA* 4 (1949)

Pearsall, Priscilla, "Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera: Modernity and the Destruction of the Romantic *Angel consoladora*," in her *An Art Alienated from Itself: Studies in Spanish American Modernism*, Valencia: Artes Gráficas Soler, 1984

Schulman, Ivan, "José Martí y Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera: iniciadores del modernismo," *Revista Iberoamericana*, vol. 3/57 (1964)

___ *Génesis del modernismo: Martí, Nájera, Silva, Casal*, Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1966

Walker, Nell, *The Life and Works of Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, The University of Missouri Studies*, vol. 2/2 (1927)

Published in *Encyclopedia of Latin American Literature*, ed. Verity Smith. London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997. Pages 408–410. A division of Springer-Verlag BV. Used by permission.