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J. Agustín Pastén B.

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, japasten@ncsu.edu

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Enrique González Martínez 1871–1952

Physician, Diplomat, and Writer

Some have called González Martínez the last great modernist poet; others prefer to consider him the first of the postmodernists. In the end, both opinions are partially correct. He never completely abandoned certain key features of modernism. Similarly, by avoiding its superficial aspects and focusing instead on the hidden property of things, González Martínez paved the way for a type of poetic sensibility that for the first time in Latin American literature paid attention to local concerns. González Martínez's poetic production was abundant, even though he led a very active life. He was a medical doctor, professor, and diplomat to Chile (1920–22), Argentina (1922–24), and Spain and

Portugal (1924–31); and he occupied several ministerial positions in the Mexican government. At the same time, he founded various literary magazines (*Argos*, *Arte*) and translated the poetry of John Milton, Paul Verlaine, and Charles-Pierre Baudelaire, among others.

González Martínez was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco, on April 13, 1871. His poetic output spans many years. He started publishing when he was very young and in time became the leading poet of Mexico. He was especially important to the Contemporaneos, although by the early 1920s his appeal among young Mexican poets had begun to dwindle. When González Martínez began to publish at the end of the nineteenth century, Mexico was perhaps the most important center of the modernist movement. Not surprisingly, therefore, the whole gamut of symbolist elements pervade his poetry. His first two collections of poems, many of which he later discarded, were *Preludios* (1903) and *Lirismos* (1907). As John S. Brushwood correctly asserts, *Preludios* could be conceived as the poets "reflection of modernismo"; "Rústica," a poem made up of 14 related sonnets, is unquestionably the best of the collection. *Lirismos* is characterized by an unmistakable mystical proclivity that, along with a pantheistic view of the world, is evident in all of his subsequent poetic works.

In *Silenter* (1909), his third book of poems and the first of real importance, the shift from an artificial to a more authentic rendering of expression is marked not only by a deeper search of self but also by a passionate penetration of every object of the universe. The poem "Irás sobre la vida de las cosas" is typical of this facet of González Martínez's poetic development. The painstaking probe of this "philosophic poet" continues in *Los senderos ocultos* (1911), his fourth and probably best-known collection of poems and one of the most significant in the evolution of Mexican poetry. This collection owes its reputation mainly to one poem, "Tuércele el cuello al cisne. . ." (Twist the Swan's Neck). This sonnet has been considered traditionally, but erroneously, the anti-modernist manifesto par excellence; likewise, González

Martínez has been seen as the poet who gave modernism its coup de grâce. This is far from the truth. In many respects, González Martínez continued being a modernist poet the rest of his life. Aside from the symbolist elements of his verse, he never quite forsook two of the most salient aspects of modernism: perfection of form and precision of expression. Thus, “Tuércele el cuello al cisne . . .” ought to be regarded chiefly as a rejection of surface rhetorical devices and exquisite frivolity, and not as a repudiation of the entire modernist movement. By “wringing” the neck of the swan with its “deceitful plumage”—and not of all swans, let it be clear—and by replacing it with the owl as the symbol for the new poetry, the lyric voice was in essence replicating Verlaine’s wringing of the neck of the vacuous eloquence of Romanticism in “Éloquence.” In his perennial exploration of inner life, González Martínez came to reject the ostentatious aspects of modernism. His poetry is above all poetry of introspection, austerity, simplicity, and intimacy; the lyric voices goal consists ultimately of deciphering the signs of the universe and finding the soul of objects. Unlike the swan, whose domain is the outside of things, the owls eyes can pierce the surface of reality and resolve lifes manifold conundrums.

The poet’s quest did not end with *Los senderos ocultos*, however. His following two books of poetry, *La muerte del cisne* (1915) and *El libro de la fuerza, de la bondad y del ensueño* (1917), continue to manifest a deep regard for nature as an increase in mystic symbolism provides a shield against the turmoil of the Mexican Revolution and World War I; in the poem “Meditación bajo la luna,” the poet regains once again the serenity of times past. González Martínez’s propensity toward mysticism is especially evident in *Parábolas y otras poemas* (1918), *La palabra del viento* (1921), and *El romero alucinado* (1923). Formally, from around this time forward he abandons traditional versification (eleven- and fourteen-syllable verses) and begins to experiment with new currents such as anti-poetic language. Despite these efforts, he never became an assiduous member of the Latin American avant-garde.

His last books of poetry reveal a religious orientation bordering on the metaphysical, which was accentuated by the deaths of his wife and son. Among these volumes are *Poemas truncos* (1935), *Vilano al viento* (1948), *Babel* (1949), and *El nuevo narciso* (1952). *Babel* is a kind of compendium of his previous poetic production. In the life of this poet who was frequently accused of elitism, this text of 14 poems focuses on the world, a world envisioned as united in a species of fraternal love. The move from the very personal to the collective at the end of his life, nonetheless, does not mean that González Martínez renounced the search. His poetry must be seen as a spiritual autobiography marked paradoxically by a perpetual ascension and a deeper understanding of reality. Enrique González Martínez died in Mexico City on February 19, 1952.

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—J. AGUSTÍN PASTÉN B.

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