



## Henrique González Casanova The Great Teacher

René Avilés Fabila\*

**T**imes have been bad for the country recently. The government is rudderless, completely disoriented. As a result, we Mexicans do not know exactly what to do. The federal and Mexico City governments are stumbling along, ruining the future. And not only that: unfortunately, a great many worthy Mexicans

with vocations in literature, academia and journalism have disappeared from the scene. The list is excessively long: Francisco Liguori died, as did Raúl Prieto (better known as Nikito Nipongo), Carlo Coccioli, Ikram Antaki, Roberto Vallarino, Gastón García Cantú, Leopoldo Zea, Mauricio Achar. For different reasons I had long and fraternal relations with all of them, and I feel obligated to write about them all.

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\* Writer and journalist.

Henrique González Casanova died recently. I met him personally in 1961 at the School of Political and Social Sciences during one of the National Autonomous University of Mexico's, and particularly the school's, best periods. UNAM authorities created the Pilot Group, a memorable academic experiment in which a small number of full-time students would have the best professors. I remember some of them well: Pablo and Henrique González Casanova, Francisco López Cámara, Víctor Flores Olea, Enrique González Pedrero, Ernesto de la Torre, Arturo Arnaiz y Freg and Carlos Bosch, among others.

I studied with all of them. With some I had a close relationship, with others it was distant, but in all cases it was respectful regardless of the differences we may have had. With Henrique González Casanova, it was something special. For someone like myself who wrote literature, his name was important. In addition to a great teacher of writing and journalism, he was a prestigious literary critic. I used to read his wonderfully written articles in the supplement edited by Fernando Benítez and Gastón García Cantú, *México en la cultura* (Mexico in Culture), and in the *Revista de la Universidad* (University Magazine) that he edited for a long period. From the very first class, we had an affinity. In the field of literature, I was a disciple of Juan José Arreola, and politically, I was a young man close to José Revueltas. González Casanova's classes, as I have said in books of memoirs, were marvelous. His culture, his depth, his razor-sharp mind, his generosity were all laid out before us in beautiful, perfect Spanish, whose words we could see in the air with appropriate punctuation. I cannot speak for my fellow students so many years later, but I personally was impressed by his melodious, well-modulated voice pointing out, for example, the characteristics of a good novel or an excellent journalistic piece. Once, he dedicated his class to Andrés Henestrosa's Spanish, and another time, to creating a memorable vision of the

marvelous literature of Juan José Arreola and Juan Rulfo, both dear friends of my teacher.

But his work and his vocation went beyond the schoolroom. I once invited him to give us a couple of talks about literature. He accepted with pleasure. I remember him asking me about the topics and I didn't know what to answer him exactly. "About letters," I said. "Well, I'll talk about poetry and some important poets of this century," he responded clearly and decisively.

The talks were given at the now defunct Carmel café, in the middle of Mexico City's Pink Zone before it was invaded by itinerant street hawkers and ruffians (the Carmel, by the way, was owned by Margo Glantz's father, Don Jacobo, always happy to welcome writers and painters to his pleasant café). It was at that time, around 1961 or 1962, that I consolidated my friendship with González Casanova. Once, when he noted that I was hesitating about my vocation, he told me not to go to another school before completing my course of studies in political science, and when I was about to finish, he encouraged me, "Get your degree, René. I'll get you a job." I accepted his advice gratefully. Above all, he was a teacher and always concerned about his students.

At one point in his life, Henrique González Casanova accepted a diplomatic post and spent a long time outside the country in Portugal and Yugoslavia where he was a very dignified ambassador. But when he returned, he immediately went back to the UNAM. There, we ran into each other and talked very early in the morning in the halls of the new School of Political Science building when I was a teacher there. It was an extraordinary pleasure to listen to him, his advice and valuable literary and journalistic recommendations.

When the noteworthy novelist Alberto Bonifaz Nuño died, at the wake, trying to ameliorate the pain of his brother Rubén, Mexico's greatest poet, Henrique González Casanova brought up a series of beautiful memories about the old times at the UNAM,



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when it was full of great teachers and restless students. Suddenly, González Casanova stopped short and said, “René, I see that you and Rubén speak in the familiar form, and you and I don’t.”

“That’s impossible. I would never dare,” I responded.

“No, please, I beg you that we stop using the formal form of address. We’re friends, and you use the familiar form with my best friend.”

I didn’t know what to do and I had to accept, even though I first explained that I had met Rubén in 1967 or 1968 when we had both just put out important books with the Fondo de Cultura Económica Publishing House in the Mexican Letters Collection, and we had also been out together several times. Rubén Bonifaz Nuño had not been my teacher and that gave me certain freedom in my dealings with him, even though he was such an eminent poet and translator. It was difficult, but I finally managed to speak to Henrique González Casanova in the familiar form. I enjoyed meeting him at the end of class and sharing his fine, elegant culture. Not long ago, my teacher and friend suffered a very deep emotional blow, and I think that

aggravated his health problems. The news of his death found me out of the country and pained me enormously. Curiously, I was never friends with Pablo González Casanova, despite being his student. But, I did know and have affectionate and respectful dealings with another brother, Manuel; we worked together in the UNAM. I didn’t know what to do, whom to give my condolences to. For that reason, I decided to write these lines to underline my sorrow. Henrique was clearly a great teacher and, consequently, a generous man, an extraordinary Mexican. Once when I had been very severe with a fashionable novelist, he recriminated me elegantly as he left his classroom, saying, “René, enemies are combated for their ideas, not their personalities.” He was right, particularly in journalism, for convincing readers.

I have the impression that his enormous legacy is basically for the UNAM. He was a full-time teacher and never stopped thinking about it. He belonged to that group of academics who do not see academia as a kind of trampoline, but who, like his brother Pablo, dedicate their whole lives to it; and he gave almost all of his. He leaves a gap almost impossible to fill. ■■■