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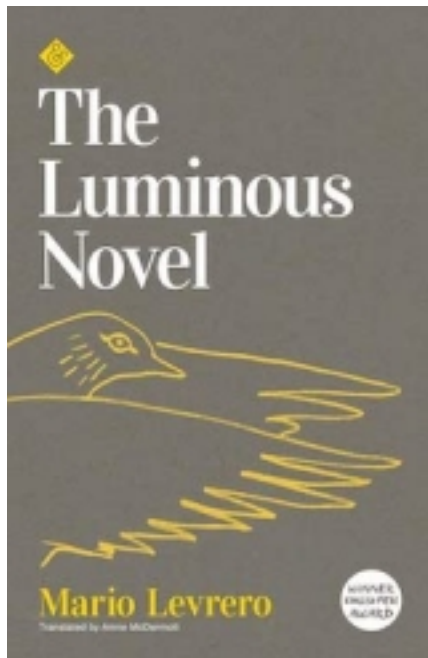
Book Reviews

Words without Borders

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Mario Levrero’s “*The Luminous Novel*”: Writing as a Spiritual Experience

Reviewed by **Isaura Contreras**



Translated from the Spanish by Annie McDermott
And Other Stories, 2021

In a work that takes the form of a diary and a novel, Uruguayan writer Mario Levrero contemplates failure and procrastination to ultimately affirm writing as an act of freedom.

The publication of Mario Levrero’s (1940-2004) *The Luminous Novel* in English, in Annie McDermott’s beautiful translation, is a true literary

event. Although Levrero has enjoyed cult status for some time in Uruguay and Argentina, his work is just beginning to get the recognition it deserves elsewhere. Published posthumously in 2005, *The Luminous Novel* is his masterpiece: an almost unclassifiable work, halfway between fiction and autobiography, in which we follow the author struggling (and failing) to write a book called “The Luminous Novel.” Fashioning himself as a sort of new Bartleby (Bartleby Lavalleja was one of his early literary pseudonyms), Levrero infinitely postpones the writing of this novel, but, as a good “scrivener,” he then records his fruitless attempts, so that not-writing becomes something to write about at length.

The Luminous Novel is a book whose importance could be compared to that of Roberto Bolaño’s *The Savage Detectives*, and one hopes this release could spark an editorial phenomenon similar to what followed the publication of Natasha Wimmer’s translation of Bolaño’s novel in 2007, almost thirty years after the so-called Latin American Boom captivated the English-speaking world. But unlike Bolaño, García Márquez, Vargas-Llosa, or Fuentes, Levrero is an author who fits only awkwardly in the Western canon or a certain imaginary of “Latin America.” Ángel Rama, the great Uruguayan critic, included him in the “rare writers” club. Rama’s *raros*, a designation meaning at the same time rare and odd, describes an Uruguayan literary trend that began with the publications of the Uruguay-born French poet Comte de Lautréamont. Lautréamont’s *Chants de Maldoror*, with its artistic rejection of bourgeois values and emphasis on the morbid, the macabre, and spiritual eroticism, would become a model for Surrealism and the avant-garde. For Rama, a similar eccentricity can be traced in a “minority trend” within the national literature that included authors like Felisberto Hernández and Armonía Somers, whose works moved away from the laws of causality, made use of the dreamlike and the strange, avoided the utopian perspective on national realities, and experimented with the space of the subjective and subconscious as ways of approaching reality.

All of these aspects can be traced throughout Levrero’s vast oeuvre (twelve novels and six collections of short stories, not to mention diaries, comics, and essays), but in Levrero the characterization of the “rare” should not be limited exclusively to recognizing its off-center position within a literary tradition. In fact, he himself mocked the label in a self-interview. His work experiments with diverse genres and themes, including science fiction, fantasy, the crime novel, autobiography, psychoanalysis, and parapsychology. His influences range from cinema

and popular culture to authors such as Raymond Chandler, Franz Kafka, and Samuel Beckett. Levrero's "rarity" has more to do with a peculiar way of approaching literary and creative phenomena, that is, with his capacity for an obsessive observation of reality that seeks to make the strange emerge from everyday life. It is there that he places the unique spiritual experience of creation.

For Levrero, the contemplation of quotidian images and their subsequent registration in writing reveals secret meanings that emanate from his subconscious and that he can later connect with an intimate and true reality. This aspect is especially evident in the final stage of his work, to which *The Luminous Novel* belongs.

Levrero received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2000 to finish a novel whose planned title was "The Luminous Novel." He had begun working on it in 1984 and, after a fifteen-year period during which he abandoned and resumed the project several times, he managed to come up with the five initial chapters later published in the novel. The Guggenheim Fellowship promised the necessary financial relief for him to finally focus on and finish *The Luminous Novel*. Instead, Levrero delivered a massive, 400 page-long diary, which he titled "Prologue: Diary of the Grant." It covered about a year of entries in which the author documented his daily life as well as his "failure" to write his novel. This text precedes the unfinished "Luminous Novel," which is just over 100 pages. Both elements are included in *The Luminous Novel* as we know it.

Levrero's experiments with the diary form date from 1986, when he started writing *Diario de un canalla* (Diary of a Scoundrel). First published in an anthology in 1992 and then again in 2014—together with the posthumous publication of *Burdeos 1972: A Diary*, written in 2003, about his memories of living in Bordeaux for a few months following a love affair—*Diario de un canalla* is closely related to *The Luminous Novel*. In the former's first entry, dated December 3, 1986, Levrero recalls that the aim of the novel, written as he was about to undergo a dreaded gallbladder operation, was "to rescue some passages of my life, with the secret idea of exorcising the fear of death and the fear of pain." In the same diary, the author tries to investigate the reasons for the abandonment of his novel and recognizes diaristic writing as a form of "self-construction," with which he tries to "rescue pieces" of himself, and thus confirms an abiding truth of his approach to his art: "I don't want to talk about style or structure: this is not a novel, dammit! My very life is at stake."

This strong affirmation underlies Levrero's later diaristic work, where writing will also be a form of recovery and vital commitment, as seen in *Empty Words* (1996) (also magnificently translated by Annie McDermott for *And Other Stories* and published in 2019). *Empty Words* is based on a kind of handwriting therapy that consisted of performing calligraphy exercises under the idea that, by improving penmanship, personality can be restored and character affirmed. What begins as an exercise in embellishment of the letter moves towards a reflection on artistic creation.

The Luminous Novel is part of the same journey of self-knowledge, therapy, and literary exercise as the previous books, but, above all, it is a renewed reflection on artistic creation as a form of spiritual experience in the contemporary world.

In *The Luminous Novel*, Levrero's inaction takes on pathological and addictive traits, which he refuses to remedy, despite his deteriorating health. He goes to sleep in the wee hours, after having spent the day experimenting with Visual Basic and playing cards on the computer; he eats little and only thanks to a generous friend who delivers him food; he is late to Yoga classes and resists leaving his house as he prepares literary workshops; he puts off therapy and spends much of his days perfecting a yogurt-making technique; he evokes failed love affairs, interprets his dreams, watches pornography, and procrastinates until dawn, when he finally puts pen to paper. His diary entries, recorded in the twilight hours, his sleep disturbances, and his inability to get off the internet are expressions of a daily and repetitive failure: the Sisyphean punishment to which life subjects him. On the other hand, this lack of discipline also reveals traits of authenticity, since life and writing "without form" is a struggle against adaptation: an expression of rebellion against demands for order in life or for rigid adherence to the conventions of literary genres. This honest and genuine acceptance of defeat is not without humor, and at the same time it is a result of deep self-reflection and spiritual searching.

The writing of Levrero's diary begins with the desire to transform the mundane everyday into a "spiritual and luminous" experience. Usually regarded as a marginal genre, the diary is transformed into a full-fledged literary work through the enunciation of its author's failure to write. Through Levrero's description of his own search for it, the elusive text becomes a tangible and concrete literary sign, making the diary the

only possible work, the central work. If addiction was a way of “escaping reality,” diary writing reestablishes connection as it becomes an exploration of a relationship with the world. Levrero’s reaction to his own helplessness is not tragic, but comical and cynical. It is a complete acceptance of failure as a possibility of life. Hence the hilarious little letters addressed to “Mr. Guggenheim,” where he writes ironically about the misuse of the funds of the grant. By thumbing his nose at one of professional writing’s most coveted prizes, Levrero mocks the institutionalization of the figure of the writer and, contrary to expectations, does not write the promised novel, but simply vindicates the experience of writing as an act of freedom, a spiritual act.

The distance between the five chapters of the novel written more than fifteen years earlier and the diary entries from the year 2000 is insurmountable. The writer has been transformed and is unable to return to that original inspiration. However, the diary as a lengthy prologue prepares us for “The Luminous Novel,” a captivating part of the book, where spiritual experiences are expressed in such simple details as watching a dog, an encounter with a pigeon, the evocation of lost loves, sexual encounters, or the conception of life as a journey in which our different selves simultaneously ride trains to various and uncertain destinations. Finally, the last chapter, “First Communion,” which appears as an independent piece, is one of the most powerful stories in the book. It narrates, by way of closing, the story of the author’s own spiritual communion and his encounter with God in adulthood. Here, the artist indulges in a religious experience that can only be compared to the mystery of the creative act, full of intensity and transience, and, in his case, not exempt from irony and ambiguity.

Both “Prologue: Diary of the Grant” and “The Luminous Novel” are deliberately unfinished. This condition honors one of Levrero’s beliefs about literature: “The only thing that matters is style.” Faced with this idea, which diminishes the value of any organically structured plot, all that matters is the voice of the writer, which comes, as Roland Barthes remarked in *Writing Degree Zero*, from an articulation between the flesh and the world. This points us to the originality and importance of Levrero’s diary, which is an exercise in style, or rather, a true literary work. That unique voice, his style, is faithfully maintained in Annie MacDermott’s translation.

When we read Mario Levrero in English, we continue to hear his comic, intelligent, cynical, and endearing voice. We feel that we are engaged in dialogue with him. We are unafraid of being alone, or of experiencing our own failure.

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